

# K. E. A T S

O

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SECOND EDITION

OXFORD  
AT THE CLARENDON PRESS

But this is human life: the war, the deeds,  
The disappointment, the anxiety,  
Imagination's struggles, far and nigh,  
All human; bearing in themselves this good,  
That they are still the air, the subtle food,  
To make us feel existence, and to show  
How quiet death is. Where soil is men grow,  
Whether to weeds or flowers; but for me,  
There is no depth to strike in.

## NOTE TO THE SECOND EDITION

THIS book has been for some time out of print. I have corrected some errors in the text of it; and the Note on Keats' *Use of the Sonnet* has been rewritten, in the light of new material for dating some of the sonnets.

I have not brought myself to print Keats's for *Keats'*, though this has been urged on me by distinguished persons. I have Mr. Ridley on my side, with his *Keats' Craftsmanship*, the book of a very good scholar. I have, myself, no scholarship in the matter. As a rule, I leave things of this kind to the printer. But I think *Keats'* ugly. I should think

'St. Agnes's Eve, ah! bitter chill it was'  
still uglier. *St. Agnes'* is, no doubt, poetical, and old-fashioned. If the same is true of *Keats'*, I do not much mind.

In deference to friendly criticism I have divided the book into sections. But, do what I would, I have not been able to devise chapters and titles.

My general view of the character of Keats' poetry remains somewhat different from that which is still fashionable. I still 'think him the great poet he is only when the senses capture him, when he finds truth in beauty, that is to say, when he does not trouble to find truth at all'.

H. W. G.

*April, 1939.*



## FROM THE PREFATORY NOTE TO THE FIRST EDITION

**A**BOUT one half of what follows reproduces lectures delivered from the Chair of Poetry at Oxford in the spring and summer of 1925. The other half was not used in lecturing, because I found it difficult to cut what I had to say to convenient lecture-lengths; and parts of it carried too much detail.

Just as I could not manage the lecture-lengths, so I have not been able to divide what I had to say by chapter and title. I should wish the whole to be read, as it was written, in run-on fashion. What unity it has is, certainly, not studied; it comes, indeed, from no better method than that of taking what interested me, and leaving what did not. If any one exclaims upon gaps and omissions, I can only answer that where I did not feel that I had anything to say I have said nothing. If everybody did the same, there would be, if not better criticism, at any rate less.

I have said nothing about *Endymion*. If it were possible to say something about it without saying too much, it would have been done already.

Upon a recent book about Keats, I have written what I think. If any one finds the tone of it too pungent, I am sorry; but I did not know how, without being a better artist, I could as well express what I meant. Some portion of what I said was printed at the time; and although by persons

who knew no better it was considered over-sharp, I prefer to reprint it without change. No one who has read my book on Wordsworth will think me, in general, ill-disposed towards American scholarship. It is a pleasure to praise the best of it—to me especially, who have twice, over a long period, enjoyed American hospitality, the most delightful that there is. It is a pleasure to praise the best of American scholarship; but I am not persuaded that I have any duty to bless its third-rate effects.

## K E A T S

### I

THERE is a great deal of poetry in the world not worth reading; and to the poetry worth reading not all of us, perhaps, bring that devotion which might make us, when we read it, worthy to do so. We ask of poetry, quite properly, pleasure; but poetry—quite properly also—asks of us pains. I have never believed that with the poetry of our own country we take enough pains. I have never believed that we either come to it after that spiritual preparation which, in other parts of our religion, we recognize as necessary, or that we read it as attentively as we might. By reading it attentively, I mean not only with attention of the mind, but with braced imagination. The one kind of attention, indeed, helps the other; and against the bane of a sprawling imagination—that direst malady of modern criticism—I know no surer prophylactic than genuine mental industry. That we should thus honestly come to grips with it, the best poetry, at least, deserves. During the period for which I hold this Chair, I propose to lecture upon good poets rather than upon bad ones; and in doing so to demand of myself, and to assume in you, a method

of scholarship somewhat more rigorous, perhaps, than custom prescribes. Not but what, towards bad poets, I feel always a kindness; for not only are they, I think, the half of my friends, but, as I have said before, any poetry is better than none, and should be judged accordingly. I conceive myself, none the less, to owe my first duty to good poetry.

Wordsworth has divided the readers of poetry into four classes. There are those with whom it is a passion or appetite, the mere coursing of youthful blood. There are those, again, with whom it is a casual elegance of recreation. There are those, once more, for whom it is a refuge; 'a protection against the pressure of trivial employments, and a consolation for the afflictions of life'. And lastly, there are its disinterested students. I have some sympathy, I hope, with all four classes. With the first there is nothing the matter save that disease of which most of us are too quickly cured—youth. Even the second class is not wholly contemptible—better a little poetry as a fashionable recreation than no poetry at all; and upon the third class, that class which seeks in poetry an anodyne for the wounds of life, to use upon that class wounding words would be to be ignorant of what life is and what poetry can do for it. Yet even this third class is not disinterested; it brings to poetry only its broken spirit, its contrite powers. The disinterested study of poetry is some-

thing better and greater than this. It is, not to collapse into poetry, but to bring to it our strength; and not our strength merely, but our trained strength. There must be preparation, and, if I may say so, purging. Particularly is it necessary that we should come to good poetry purged from the bad poetry which so easily besets us; I mean not merely the bad poetry which is written all around us; but the bad poetry which is talked and felt every where, the false sentiment of our familiar human occasions; and the bad poetry which is within us.

If these moralizings seem to ask excuse or apology, there are several circumstances which can easily furnish either. I have chosen for my subject a poet in whom the love of poetry was so completely disinterested, and the study of it sublimed to that degree of purity, that he sets a standard. I say 'the study of it'; for more than most of our poets Keats was truly a student of his art; a student hindered seriously by some of the hindrances which I have just mentioned; defect of training, the false sentiment of the social environment in which he was thrown, the bad poetry about him, the bad poetry within him; yet essentially a student, and never at any time tempted to believe that the study of poetry demanded of a man less than his best powers. It is natural, I know, it is easy and inviting, when we read Keats, to sink ourselves in a mere luxury of poetry.

To ask the mind to attend, the imagination to brace itself, eye and ear to scrutinize the conviction of their own voluptuousness, seems at once barbaric and outside meaning. Yet that is only to say, what all poetry refutes, that there is a poetry which is easy. If there were, it would be the poetry which is hardest of all, the bad poetry. But there is in fact no such thing as easy poetry. That the best poetry sometimes seems easy is, in truth, one of the hard things about it. It *seems* easy, and just from that circumstance spring all the evils of what I have called the 'sprawling imagination'. In no other region of criticism, I should suppose, has the sprawling imagination operated more unfortunately than in the criticism of Keats. I say that in general terms; but having said it, it would be pusillanimous in me to hide what I have in mind. Recently, we have been given—that is to say, some of us have bought—a new book about Keats; a book by an American scholar; a book of an amplitude so notable that not to notice it would be more uncivil in me than to say what I think of it. In the course of these lectures, it is likely that I shall make occasional reference to the book of which I speak. Here and now, therefore, I think it proper to attempt a general characterization of it; and I am sorry not to be able to characterize it in favourable terms. It is, as I say, a book of a very notable amplitude.

It runs to 1,293 pages; it is, in other words, more than twice as long as the longest book about Keats that ever was. Industry, ambition, enthusiasm, cry themselves upon every page of it, and infect even the headings of chapters. 'The Crystallizing of Intention', 'Horizons and Thunderheads', 'Swift Currents', 'A Tide and its Undertow'—such titles sufficiently mark the moral qualities I mention—even to a reader imperfectly acquainted with the phenomena of Undertows and Thunderheads. The Preface to the book speaks of it as utilizing 'an unexpected wealth of new material, uncharted and almost unexplored'. The truth is that to a man who had the patience of Job, the good health of Methuselah, and the wide leisure of the working classes—blessings of which I partake only fitfully—the infinite room of these two volumes would discover a little riches in the form of hitherto unpublished documents. That most of these documents either are, or can be, used to effective purpose, I am not persuaded; nor that the writer has any proper sense of what makes a document important. 'A most important document which has lately come to light', she says, speaking of Keats' Italian passport. Its importance is, in fact, nil; of its dollar-value I can make no conjecture. But not only does Miss Lowell call it 'most important'; she transcribes the greater part of it; and by the sonorous

rhythms of its earlier clauses—‘His Majesty the King of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and his Majesty the King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland’—her otherwise democratic spirit is so evidently affected that, when she comes to the signature of the accredited ambassador of these kings, she is unable to decipher it.

Prima facie, the most important of Miss Lowell’s documents are some hitherto unpublished letters of Fanny Brawne. Sir Edmund Gosse, who is a cautious scholar, has recently expressed himself as not convinced about the genuineness of these. He thinks it possible that some one may have imposed upon Miss Lowell. Any one, I think, may have; but I have no information which would entitle me to speak upon the question of authenticity. The letters are ‘the property of a gentleman who does not wish his name to be disclosed’.<sup>1</sup> If I had both his name and address, I do not think that I should call upon him and make a bid for the manuscript.<sup>2</sup>

I find Miss Lowell’s book defective in what I call general scholarship. I do not complain of her (as some one else has done) for supposing that *Thalia*—which Keats rhymes with *higher*—should properly be rhymed only with such words as *Dahlia* and

<sup>1</sup> ii. 133.

<sup>2</sup> The genuineness of these letters is now generally acknowledged. But upon the subject of their value I am unrepentant.

*Westphalia*. But I do complain of her for not knowing, after all the criticism to which Keats' Cockney rhymes have been subjected, the point of the criticism: quite evidently, if she had known how *Thalia* is pronounced, Miss Lowell would no more have seen why it should not (if it should not) be rhymed with *higher* than Keats himself. Of Keats' 'Floure and Lefe' sonnet she writes: 'The last couplet with its rhyme of "sobbings" and "robins" really ruins the poem.' That *may* be so, but Miss Lowell goes on: 'Keats' authority for this was probably his own false pronunciation. Did the middle classes of those days habitually drop their "g's", as did the "swells" of the eighties?' I suppose I must not ask whether Miss Lowell had a grandfather. My own was born somewhere in the eighties, not of the nineteenth, but of the eighteenth century; I doubt if he ever said, or heard, anything but *sobbin'*, and the like. But not only that. Miss Lowell thinks that Keats borrowed *sobbin'* from Wordsworth's *Redbreast and Butterfly*. Yet is there any period of modern English poetry in which, until you get well into the nineteenth century, rhymes like *robin* and *sobbing* were not thought good rhymes—by all good poets? 'The rhymes of this class were perfect', says Professor Wyld;<sup>1</sup> and he does not think it worth while to collect examples—he would never end if he

<sup>1</sup> *Studies in English Rhymes*, p. 112.

began. If Keats had rhymed *spring* and *bin*, I should have been surprised; but in all periods the dropping of 'g' was so common that even this rhyme was thought tolerable by a Caroline poet.

Miss Lowell's defect of criticism mirrors itself in her prolix style. The prolixity is not merely verbal, it is a prolixity of the imagination. If any one wishes to know what kind of injury to sense and sentiment this faculty can perpetrate, he need perhaps read no farther than Miss Lowell's first chapter. Indeed, the opening sentences of it, which describe minutely what kind of fluttering leaves and scampering rats and unemployed footmen saluted the marriage morn of *Keats' parents*—these alone might suffice; or if not alone, we might perhaps add to them the paragraphs which describe Keats' first day at school—and his first night; for Miss Lowell pursues 'the little fellow', as she calls him, to the dormitory. 'We do not need to be told', she says (more truly than she thinks), 'we do not need to be told that he stuffed his bedclothes into his mouth, that no one should hear the sobs he could not control.' We do not need to be told that, nor a thousand and one things else, just as likely to be false as true, which the fatal facility of a prolix imagination compels Miss Lowell to tell us. Nor having been told that, do we need to be told the method of the book is the psychological. I will not say with the

ore of psychology, but with the dross of psycho-analysis, Miss Lowell 'loads every rift'. Upon the subject of Keats' unhappy passion for Fanny Brawne she gives us so much psycho-analytics that I begin to wonder whether it is worth while having poets and poetesses at all if they can only be created male and female. 'Keats' senses', writes Miss Lowell, 'were, as we know, infinitely more acute than most people's; when to his normal abnormality in this respect was added the sting of sexual desire, goaded to a pathological degree by the nature of his disease, he could no more master himself than he could fly' (ii. 419-20—I give the reference because I shall not be believed if I do not). What is meant by 'normal abnormality', how a sting can be goaded, and how Miss Lowell could dare those final four words, I no more know 'than I can fly'. But I do know that this is not the way to write about our fellow-creatures—or even about poets. In her leisure (which must be infinite) Miss Lowell would seem to have conducted what Americans call a 'research' into the connexions which nature has established between jealousy and tuberculosis. Like many people, I have never quite understood *Othello*; but the chief part of his complaint I can now diagnose as pulmonary phthisis.

I am sorry not to be able to speak of this book in terms more favourable. I came to it with high

expectations—for it was not unheralded. It has disappointed me. I would have been willing to say that of it, and no more, save that not a few persons who should know better (as well as some who should not) have praised it. I hear it spoken of as a good and learned book, a scholarly study. I cannot believe it to be this; and I feel obliged to say so plainly. If not in this country, at any rate elsewhere, there are too many students of English literature who, when they have made a desert and called it 'research', suppose themselves to have done something for scholarship.

I will leave this book, about which, since I was to speak of Keats, I could not say nothing. Better men than I, no doubt, have praised it. But I hope that, by the example of better men, I shall at no time be induced either to disparage what I admire or to praise what I despise. I will leave this book for a book far better.

Sir Sidney Colvin's Life of Keats brings together the results of more than thirty years of scholarly study. In its valedictory pages, the writer takes up, and puts by, two questions which it was difficult to avoid. Chance, or art, timed the book so that it appeared exactly a hundred years after Keats' first volume of Poems; and 'all this labour spent upon Keats' memory', the writer asks, . . . 'all this load of editing and re-editing and commentary and bio-

graphy and scholiast-work laid upon a poet who declared that all poems ought to be understood without any comment . . . is it not at least in danger of smothering Keats himself and his poetry?' As becomes him—and as was natural in one who could not divine, among the hidden purposes of Providence, Miss Lowell—as becomes him, Sir Sidney Colvin answers with courage. 'Keats', he says, 'can never be smothered.' He answers with courage; and he is even ready to welcome a reaction from the methods of his own devotion; to the student who begins to cry for 'a naked text', for Keats without Colvin, 'so much the better', he says magnanimously; and promises to him, if only he read Keats 'often enough' (a justly calculated proviso), that he 'will find his life enriched with much of the best that poetry can do for human life'. That, certainly, is well and nobly said. 'The best that poetry can do for human life.' But his own phrase leads Sir Sidney Colvin to a further question. Revising his text just after the War, he reflects that human life never stands still; and 'have not the last six years', he asks, 'been an utterly unprecedented, overwhelming, and transforming experience for mankind?' Beside a world of 'so prodigiously intensified experiences', does not the world of Keats, of his poetry, of his temperament, loom up decolorated, vapid, unreal?

This question he answers in his own way, or

perhaps in that of the times: content to remind us of a young soldier-poet before whose vision, in the moments preceding battle, there surged up images of the wrathful Hyperion, and the figures of the Grecian Urn, the face of La Belle Dame, and the eyes of Cortez staring at the Pacific. Whether there Sir Sidney Colvin answers, or only allays, his question, I should not like to say. Nor do I easily persuade myself that it serves any useful purpose to try and fit Keats into the Great War—into the Great War, or the little Peace—or any other of the subduing interests of the time. I have the feeling, indeed, that Sir Sidney Colvin has raised a metaphysical question, and answered it rhetorically. That I can answer it better, that is metaphysically, is neither likely, nor will you demand it of me. Let me say only that I can conceive a metaphysic which should employ quite different values; which should show me the Great War as the great Unreality; which, against the cant of a world made safe for democracy, should vindicate mankind made safe for poetry. Indeed, of the Treaty of Versailles and the Ode to a Grecian Urn, which (let any man ask himself), which belongs the more truly to the substance of things, which is the more demonstrably conversant with shadows? And, not to go outside these great issues of recent history, to which world belong our more precious memories, our noblest regrets,

our best pains and prayers? to the world of what, by habit, we call fact, or to the dream-world of romance, knight-errantry, medieval faith?

I say so much; and the dissentient I fear most is Keats himself; whom I conceive as never wholly at home in his own perfections, but for ever plotting escape, I will not say to the kind of world where Sir Sidney Colvin would have him, but at least to a world sharply contrasted with that world of pure imaginative forms in which alone his genius works effectively. Between this other world and his own world, the world of his characteristic creations, the contrast presents itself to him sometimes as that between mere poetry and a poetry of social interests, sometimes as an antagonism of the senses with the mind, of the emotional life with the life of philosophic reflection. What weakness his poetry has it draws precisely from the vacillation of his temperament between one or other of these two antitheses.

Certainly the heroical element, and the political and social interest, fill a less place in Keats' poetry than in that of any other of the great poets of the romantic revival. It was this in Keats which, as you remember, estranged the sympathy of one of the most eminent of my predecessors in this Chair, Courthope; which, indeed, made Courthope the only unsympathetic critic whom Keats has found—I exclude, of course, the first critics, the Tartars of

the *Quarterly*. 'The poetry of Keats', says Courthope, 'exhibits the progressive efforts of a man of powerful genius to create for his imagination an ideal atmosphere, unaffected by the social influences of his age.' With much of what Courthope urges against him Keats would have felt, I think, a good deal of sympathy. That his poetry wanted reality, he was fully sensible; and there were seasons, certainly, when he was not disinclined to believe that this missing reality was to be sought along the lines indicated by Courthope's criticism. Some of his earlier ambitions in poetry, some of his earlier exercises in it, we too easily forget. 'He was of the sceptical and republican school', writes the earliest of his friends; 'an advocate for the innovations which were making progress in his time; a fault-finder with everything established. . . . I, on the contrary, loved the institutions of my country.' It was to this friend, George Felton Mathew, that Keats addressed the first of the Epistles in the volume of 1817; and Mathew, it may be suspected, had done what we are all in danger of doing, he had grown more respectable as he grew older. In 1817 he was not too respectable to be flattered by the suggestion that either he, or Keats, or both of them together, should weave round William Tell or William Wallace or King Alfred an epic of freedom. In *Sleep and Poetry* Keats conjoins King Alfred with

the Polish patriot Kosciusko. Those arrant republicans, Coleridge and Hunt, had long ago saluted Kosciusko with indifferent sonnets; and a sonnet to Kosciusko finds a place in Keats' first volume. Two other sonnets dedicated to liberty fall within the same period; the sonnet on Hunt's imprisonment (written with recollections of Wordsworth, and faulty with Wordsworth's faultiness), and the posthumously published sonnet *On the Peace*. To roughly the same date belongs the sonnet *On Receiving a Laurel Crown from Leigh Hunt*.<sup>1</sup> There the republican speaks again in the lines:

only I see  
A trampling down of what the world most prizes,  
Turbans and crowns and blank regality;  
as he does also, perhaps, in the reference to 'abject Caesars' in the sonnet *To a Young Lady who sent me a Laurel Crown*.<sup>2</sup> (Laurel crowns were cheap in this period, and Keats put his, I think, to cheap uses.) To these pieces we may now add the lines upon the restoration of Charles II, which are printed for the first time in Miss Lowell's book:<sup>3</sup>

Infatuate Britons, will you still proclaim  
His memory, your direst, foulest shame,  
Nor patriots revere?

<sup>1</sup> De Selincourt,<sup>4</sup> p. 386 a.

<sup>2</sup> ib., p. 349.

<sup>3</sup> i, p. 66. In line 1 Miss Lowell gave *while* for *will*. The correction, since confirmed by the MS., was first made, I think, by myself, and subsequently by Sir E. Gosse.

and so forth.<sup>1</sup> The same accents, but chastened and ennobled, are heard in the concluding stanzas of the otherwise little notable poem *To Hope*; where the catalogue of things hoped for culminates in a prayer for English liberty:

In the long vista of the years to roll,  
Let me not see our country's honour fade:  
O let me see our land retain her soul,  
Her pride, her Freedom; and not Freedom's shade!

Like that of Wordsworth and Coleridge, the republicanism of Keats is strongly tinged with what we call pacifism; a pacifism so sensitive, indeed, that he cannot contemplate a patch of poppies in an oat-field but he must needs exclaim upon them as

So pert and useless that they bring to mind  
The scarlet coats that pester human kind.

The lines occur in a poem which, save as it reveals temperament, has small merit. But at least one

<sup>1</sup> The undated fragment 'Where's The Poet' belongs I should suppose to a later period, perhaps that of Keats' visit to the Burns country (1818). There, the Poet

Is the man who with a man  
Is an equal, be he King,  
Or poorest of the beggar clan.

The anti-aristocratic bias was still strong in Keats in the summer of 1818. See the poem *The Gadfly*, and compare with it the letter from Westmorland of that year first printed (with its spiteful reference to 'Lord Wordsworth') by Professor Rusk in 1924, and reprinted by Miss Lowell, ii. 21-2.

passage in it is significant; that in which Keats delineates the claims which he hopes, after death, to have upon the gratitude of his countrymen:

What though I leave this dull and earthly mould,  
Yet shall my spirit lofty converse hold  
With after times. The patriot shall feel  
My stern alarum, and unsheathe his steel;  
Or in the senate thunder out my numbers,  
To startle princes from their easy slumbers.  
The sage will mingle with each moral theme  
My happy thoughts sententious; he will teem  
With lofty periods when my verses fire him,  
And then I'll stoop from heaven to inspire him.  
Lays have I left of such a dear delight  
That maids will sing them on their bridal night.

The concluding couplet takes us to the Keats with whom we are familiar; but to forget altogether the other Keats, and the ambition of a poetry which should startle princes from the sleep of circumstance, is to indulge a false and, upon the whole, a damaging emphasis. The business of startling princes Keats takes up again at a later date in the ill-managed polemic against the Holy Alliance which opens the third book of *Endymion*. And therewith you might suppose him to have sown his wild oats and his red poppies, and the 'progressive effort' to begin, of which Courthope speaks, towards an ideal world 'unaffected by the social influences of his age'. Only in that world, let me say

again and at once, does Keats move easily, with the divine ease of poetry. But that it was the world that he wanted (or that he always wanted), that he was wholly happy to be there, that he was not perpetually scheming himself out of it, I am not persuaded. After all, what may be called his last act in poetry was to throw *Hyperion* to the rubbish heap; to substitute for it *Hyperion: A Vision*; and in the *Vision* to speak the condemnation of everything in his poetry which had preceded it.

In the prologue to the *Vision* no one, we are told plainly, no one can usurp the height of poetry who does not draw his strength from social suffering.

None can usurp this height, returned that Shade,  
But those to whom the miseries of the world  
Are misery, and will not let them rest.

The Shade uses even plainer language. Thou art a dreaming thing, says Moneta, addressing the poet himself,

Thou art a dreaming thing,  
The fever of thyself; think of the earth.

For thinking of the earth Keats had in fact small aptitude; or it was an earth peopled only by flowers and the scent of flowers, or men and women whose nature was that of flowers and scents. And yet, more fully I think than we realize, he shared with the poets his contemporaries the revolutionary

conscience; and this is his last word to us, not, I think, his truest word, but his last word, upon the office of the poet. I could think it came rather from Shelley than from Keats. 'I refused to visit Shelley', he says, in one of his letters, 'that I might have my own unfettered scope.' The Shelley whom he was unwilling to visit was, I fancy, the humanitarian and political Shelley, Shelley, of his own humanitarianism, so often the inhuman evangelist. That the political obsession could ever have come to dominate Keats as it dominated Shelley, I find it difficult to believe. This passage of *Hyperion*, a last word from the period, be it remembered, of Keats' failing strength, has impressed criticism more deeply, I fancy, than there was need. It has been acclaimed as pointing us to a Keats to whom longer life would have brought a deeper poetry, a poetry quickened by the sorrow that has no infection of selfishness, the beauty which is beyond the senses. A deeper poetry, certainly, we might with confidence predict; but deeper, I feel, in a kind, not less like, but more like, Keats. This passage, none the less, with the others of which I have spoken, may at least remind us that he was more the child of the Revolutionary Idea than we commonly suppose; and that this Idea should carry him into a poetry in which he was never likely to be competent, there was always some danger. Of the pieces in the *Poems* of 1817,

the longest, and the last, and in some ways the most interesting, is *Sleep and Poetry*. Of this poem a passage which has been much commented upon<sup>1</sup> announces in very explicit terms the author's ambitions in poetry. He would wish 'for ten years' in which he may 'overwhelm' himself in an order of poetry of which the living figures are Flora and Pan and 'white-handed nymphs in shady places', with one or another of whom the poet will play at kisses or at books, or dance or tame a dove, or wander on and on

Through almond blossoms and rich cinnamon,  
Till in the bosom of a leafy world  
We rest in silence, like two gems upcurled  
In the recesses of a pearly shell.

*That* poetry, *that* Keats, we know well, and the affinity of his genius with this luxury of sensuous impressions. But he has wider and deeper ambitions in poetry; and in what follows he makes confident revelation of them:

And can I ever bid these joys farewell?  
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,  
Where I may find *the agonies, the strife*  
*Of human hearts.*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 96-180.

<sup>2</sup> There follows the well-known description of the Car of the Imagination 'pawing up against the light', and 'doing strange deeds upon the clouds'. The two stages of poetic development

Thus early does he feel himself summoned out of his proper world. Something more upon this subject I shall say later. But it is proper, here and now, to mark in him this fitful setting of his temperament towards a world where I conceive him to have, in fact, very little business, a world which touches our world, the crying and striving of our politics, our social misery.

## II

Not in political thinking, nor in tears given to human suffering, but in something which, though it seems easier, is, in fact, far harder, lies Keats' real effectiveness; in the exercise, I mean, of the five senses. As I say, it *seems* easier. Yet how few take trouble with it, how few manage it efficiently; how few, in comparison with the many who, in the enthusiasm of humanity, or in practical social zeal, are at least creditable practitioners! How few so much as know what it means! When I say that, I am thinking, not merely of the manner in which criticism has misconceived things said in this connexion by Keats himself, but I am thinking of some of Keats' own difficulties, of difficulties which touch the very nature of poetry. Of misconceived which Keats envisages are meant to correspond, perhaps, to the distinction between Fancy and Imagination, which so much occupied the romantics.

dicta of Keats none is better known than, from a letter written to his friend Bailey, the often-quoted 'O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts!' Absurdly, it has been brought into connexion with what is recorded by Haydon of Keats painting his throat with Cayenne pepper, in order 'to enjoy the delicious coldness of claret in all its glory'; and with much else no whit more relevant. Perhaps it will not much help to say, what is true, that, in the letter referred to, Keats is thinking, not of claret, but of Coleridge. I say, perhaps it will not much help, for the reason that only recently a distinguished critic, Professor Elton, has spoken of Coleridge as 'the first of the decadents'. I know what he means, I just know what he means; at least I know what he means so far as he really means it. It is not true; and it is just not good fun, from a defect, not in Professor Elton, but in the nature of decadence. What is the matter with decadence is precisely that there is no poetry of it; all things else have their poetry, but not decadence. And worse than that; if Coleridge is the first of the decadents, the second, heaven help us, is Wordsworth. These two began it. Of both, the poetry stands essentially in the exercise of the five senses, in the life of sensations. Indeed the supreme achievement of Wordsworth and Coleridge was to vindicate the senses in poetry. It is this that makes the greatness of the

*Lyrical Ballads*; not the hesitant application of a theory of poetic diction, but the confident assertion, and the practical demonstration, of a theory of poetic truth. To the theory which they vindicated, or revindicated, so powerfully, perhaps neither Wordsworth nor Coleridge—certainly not Coleridge—remained consistently true. The reactions of Keats upon this theory are full of interest and instruction. In the end he came to think of both Wordsworth and Coleridge as the renegades of their own gospel. Of contemporary poets these two alone influenced him profoundly—Coleridge to a degree of which he was less conscious, I think, than was proper. Yet of both of them he is, in his letters, severely critical; and his criticism is directed always to the same point—neither of them will let well alone, neither will leave the senses to do their own work, but must needs comment. Speaking of Wordsworth, ‘Are we to be bullied’, he writes, ‘into a certain philosophy engendered in the whims of an egotist? Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them. . . . We hate poetry which has a palpable design on us. . . . Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul, and does not startle or amaze it with itself, but with its subject. . . . we need not be teased with grandeur and merit, when we can have them uncontaminated and unobtrusive.’

In Coleridge, again, he complains of an 'irritable reaching after fact and reason'. Coleridge, he says, will 'let go a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the very penetralia<sup>1</sup> of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge'; whereas 'with a great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather, obliterates all consideration'. As I have said, it is of Coleridge, and of Wordsworth, that Keats is thinking when, in his letter to Bailey, he uses the famous and much misapplied words 'O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts'. It is no more than if he had said, 'O for the pure gospel of the *Lyrical Ballads*!'

Of that pure gospel he, certainly, is the purest expositor; and only as he sustains the earnest sensuousity to which nature dedicated him does his genius thrive. So that I marvel that, just as some have sought the true Keats in his fitful excursions from the life of the senses into the social interest, so others have fancied that they found him great, or preclusive of his real greatness, in those parts of his writings, whether the poems or the letters, where they can discover any direction of talent which hints a flight from the senses to the mind, from a mere receptivity of the imagination to an active

<sup>1</sup> penetralium *edd.* I have tried to believe that Keats knew better.

metaphysical reflection. Among offenders of this kind may be reckoned Matthew Arnold, who is not happy until he can show Keats to be 'no merely sensuous poet', but a poet with whom passion is 'intellectual and spiritual', a poet who, before all else, perceives 'the necessary relation of beauty with truth'. For myself, let me say frankly that I have never so much admired as I should, that is to say, as other persons do, those famous lines from the *Ode to a Grecian Urn* in which Keats, more formally, perhaps indeed more flatly, than there was need, instructs us that

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,

and that we neither have, nor can want, any other knowledge. Whether this is to have a theory of truth, and not rather neither to have one nor to want one, I am not sure. The lines are so often taken from their context that it is perhaps worth while putting them back into it. In the stanza in which they occur,<sup>1</sup> it is the effect of art, Keats says, or—what is the same thing—it is the function of the Grecian Urn to

tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity.

The same phrase—'tease us out of thought'—

<sup>1</sup> Upon the difficulties of interpretation in this stanza, see pp. 105 sqq., where, even so, I am not sure that I have followed the connexions.

occurs in a poem written a year earlier, the lines to J. H. Reynolds:

O never will the prize,  
High reason, and the love of good and ill  
Be my award! Things cannot to the will  
Be settled, but they tease us out of thought.

The truth is that it is the fate of the poet, at least as Keats conceives him, the fate of the poet, and, as I think, his salvation, that, in nature and in art, there is that always which teases him out of thinking, which, when he has thrown himself upon thought, throws him back again upon the senses. In the poem to Reynolds, the lines which I have quoted are immediately preceded by some lines upon which Matthew Arnold, eager to see in Keats the promise of a genuine student of intellectual truth, has seized over-greedily, perhaps. My flag, says Keats,

My flag is not unfurled  
On the admiral staff, and to philosophise  
I dare not yet.

I can see there the threat—for I will not say the promise—of a philosophic poetry. But, once again, it is well to read poetry with attention, and to take words in their context. For Keats goes on:

It is a flaw  
In happiness  
(in the joy, he means, of the senses)

It is a flaw  
In happiness, to see beyond our bourn—  
It forces us in summer skies to mourn,  
It spoils the singing of the nightingale.

Does any one think that any study of truth, any flight from the senses to the mind, was ever likely to carry Keats to perfections purer or higher than those of the *Ode to a Nightingale*?

That he harboured, and over a period of some extension, the thought of such a flight, is true enough. But precisely in this vacillation between the senses and mind, lies not his strength, but, as I think, his weakness. You may trace this vacillation fairly clearly in the Letters. The trouble began, I am afraid, in Oxford. It began with Bailey, who was Keats' host in Oxford. Bailey had the good luck to be a student of Wordsworth and the ill luck to be reading for Orders. I say 'ill luck', not in disparagement of the profession of a clergyman, but as deprecating a circumstance which had, I think, unfortunate reactions upon Keats. With Bailey Keats subsequently quarrelled. The quarrel was of a nature, perhaps, somewhat trivial. Bailey was reading for Orders, and he became later a respectable clergyman. To Keats it seemed inconsistent with a calling which, if not gentlemanly, is at any rate holy, that, in an affair of the heart, his friend should have two strings to his bow, and should engage

himself to a new love before he had fairly disengaged himself from the old. However, Bailey became, as I say, a respectable clergyman. It may be suspected that, when Keats stayed with him in Oxford, Bailey had the design of making of this singularly pagan poet, not indeed a clergyman, but a philosophic poet upon what may be called modified clerical lines; with a philosophy, that is, approximating as closely as possible to that of Wordsworth's *Excursion*. From Bailey's printed reminiscences of Keats, you can divine what he was after—and that he supposed himself to have come nearer to it than he in fact had. At this time, he writes, Keats seemed to me 'to value Wordsworth rather in particular passages than in the full-length portrait, as it were, of the great imaginative and philosophic poet which he really is, and which Keats, not long afterwards, felt him to be.'

That the 'full-length' portrait of Wordsworth is too full and too long to do justice to his genius, and that in that part of him in which he is most a Christian philosopher he is least a poet, this, I take it, nobody will now contest—we side here, all of us, with Keats, and against Bailey. Bailey, it is true, speaks of Keats as 'not long afterwards' coming round to his own view. But that he misconceived the situation, either at the time or in his recollection of it, Keats' letters are good enough evidence.

Nearly two years later, Keats writes of himself as one who 'liketh *half* of Wordsworth'.<sup>1</sup> What is, however, true, I think, and what appears from the letter to Bailey to which I have already referred, is that to Bailey, and to Oxford, Keats owed his first pre-occupation with the idea of a philosophic poetry. The letter<sup>2</sup> is worth considering in detail, and as a whole. Again and again Keats' commentators quote scraps of it, but I know no attempt to exhibit the connexions of the whole.

In this letter, Keats speaks of Bailey's 'momentary start about the authenticity of the Imagination' (for Bailey the imagination is a suspect witness to the reality of things). 'I am certain of nothing', Keats rejoins, 'but of the holiness of the heart's affections, and the truth of Imagination. What the Imagination seizes as beauty must be truth.' 'I am more zealous in this affair', he goes on, 'because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning.' 'And yet it must be', he adds. But, at once, taking away what he gives, 'However it may be', he super-adds, 'O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts!' Of such a life he speaks as of 'a shadow of reality to come', and hazards the 'speculation' that the life of the world to come will be only just

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, p. 232.

<sup>2</sup> Ib., pp. 40-4.

such a sensational experience 'repeated in a higher tone'. Already here the 'simple imaginative mind', the mind, that is, of the pure poet, has its satisfaction—achieves poetry—by the repetition 'in a higher tone' of the effects of sense 'silently working', and 'coming continually upon the spirit with a fine suddenness'.

It is all of it mere Wordsworthianism. Poetry 'takes its origin from' the emotions of sense 'recollected in tranquillity' (Wordsworth's 'tranquillity' and Keats' 'silent working' are one and the same process). 'The tranquillity', says Wordsworth—though it is usual to forget that he says so<sup>1</sup>—'disappears' in the passionate act of poetic creation; it disappears, 'and an emotion kindred to that which' preceded is 'reproduced'. Wordsworth speaks of this emotion, indeed, as 'gradually reproduced'; for Keats, it 'comes continually upon the spirit with a fine suddenness'. But the difference of emphasis here is due only to the accident of the context. With the 'fine suddenness' of which Keats speaks Wordsworth is familiar enough; and the gradual character of the whole process is clearly recognized by Keats elsewhere—as when he speaks of 'the innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its material be-

<sup>1</sup> I have dealt with this much misinterpreted passage at leng<sup>th</sup> in my *Wordsworth*, pp. 157 sqq.

fore it arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-horn perception of beauty'.<sup>1</sup>

This life of sensations repeating themselves 'in a higher tone'—a life which, whether here or here-after, is poetry—'can only befall those', Keats says to Bailey, 'who delight in sensation, rather than hunger as you do after Truth'. Then, lest this should seem hard, or unfriendly, he intimates that he conceives his friend to be, not a 'simple imaginative mind', but a 'complex mind', 'who would exist partly on sensation, and partly on thought, to whom it is necessary that years should bring the philosophic mind'. The contrast of 'complex' with 'simple' is intended, it would seem, to convey compliment; but what Bailey made, or was meant to make, of this obscure flattery I cannot even guess. The quotation from Wordsworth, which accompanies it, obviously brings both 'the full-length philosophic Christian poet' and his champion into the same category. That Keats' sympathy is, in fact, with the half-length poet, who stays in his sensationalism, and will not go to the full length of 'consecutive reasoning'—so much is plain. It is only fair, however, to Bailey and to Wordsworth to notice that this sympathy is not unembarrassed, and that, in connexion with the problem of sensation and thought Bailey would seem to have

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, p. 94.

brought Keats up before difficulties which are not handled better than rhetorically.

The problem continued to occupy him. It put him at once out of temper with Coleridge. The letter<sup>1</sup> which speaks of Coleridge's 'irritable reaching after fact and reason', his refusal to 'remain content with half-knowledge', his want of 'negative capability' (a quality not essentially different, I fancy, from what Wordsworth calls 'wise passivity') —this letter<sup>2</sup> was written just a month after the letter to Bailey. It is followed a fortnight later by two letters,<sup>3</sup> one to Haydon, one to his brothers, in both of which Keats speaks of the *Excursion* as one of the 'three things to rejoice at in this age'. I have the suspicion that, under the influence of Bailey, Keats had at this time begun to 'rejoice', not only in the good poetry, but in the bad philosophy, of the *Excursion*—for this great, but embarrassing, poem abounds in both. Another fortnight passes, and we have another letter to Bailey.<sup>4</sup> It says nothing of the old argument; but it encloses some verses which Keats 'knows Bailey would like'. They are the lines *On seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair*. In the third stanza, Keats vows to 'leave to an after-time' some record in verse of the life and work of

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, pp. 46-8.

<sup>3</sup> ib., pp. 53-4.

<sup>4</sup> ib., pp. 61-4.

Milton. But at the present the project is idle; for he needs, he says, a long philosophic training:

But vain is now the burning and the strife,  
Pangs are in vain, *until I grow high-rife*  
*With old philosophy,*  
And mad with glimpses of futurity.

Milton as a *philosopher*, be it remembered, impressed Keats in this period more than seems to us natural. 'Milton as a philosopher', he says in another letter,<sup>1</sup> 'had, sure, as great powers as Wordsworth.' The verses belong to the last days of January, 1818.<sup>2</sup> In them Keats first intimates that ambition of philosophic poetry which possessed him fitfully until, perhaps, the end. A month later he has discovered that Wordsworth is not the philosopher he has passed for. 'He is a great poet', he writes to his brothers,<sup>3</sup> 'if not a philosopher.' Yet a letter to Bailey<sup>4</sup> of March 14th admonishes us of the essentially fitful character of his own philosophic ambitions. 'I must once for all tell you', he says, 'that I have not one idea of the truth of any of my speculations. I shall never be a reasoner

<sup>1</sup> ib., p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> January 21. Ten days later the last lines of 'Hence Burgundy, Claret and Port' express the same ambition. [In line 17 of this piece, I take the opportunity of noticing that the rhyme-correspondence is to be restored by inserting, after *meridian*, the word *zone*.]

<sup>3</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> ib., p. 82.

because I care not to be in the right, when retired from bickering, and in a proper philosophical temper.' The tone, it will be noticed, is somewhat that of a backsliding convert. It is only eleven days later (Mar. 25th) that he sends to Reynolds the verses, already noticed, in which Matthew Arnold finds so much promise of 'intellectual production':

To philosophise  
I dare not yet.

His 'flag is not unfurled'. Things, and their mere beauty, still 'tease him out of thought'. On April 24th, in a letter<sup>1</sup> to his publisher, John Taylor, he sums up in a single, and singularly instructive, sentence the condition to which the past months have conducted him. 'I have been hovering for some time between an exquisite sense of the luxurious, and a love for philosophy. Were I calculated for the former, I should be glad.'

'Were I calculated for the former'! As though there were any other poet equally calculated for it, equally endowed with this 'exquisite sense of the luxurious'! Yet from this region of gifts, in which alone he was destined to show the felicity of genius, he is ready to turn away; and three days later we find him very solemnly telling Reynolds that he means to 'prepare himself to ask Hazlitt in about a year's time the best metaphysical road he can take'.

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, p. 100.

I hope Hazlitt, who—perhaps because he cared little for Keats— influenced him profoundly, would have told him plainly that the best road was the road home. However, in this same letter he sends Reynolds a specimen of *Isabella or the Pot of Basil*—the best commentary we could ask on this spring fit of philosophizing. He had begun the poem in February, and by the end of April it was finished: a piece full of his *characteristic* perfections, the first in which his ‘exquisite sense of the luxurious’ luxuriates to consummate effects: a piece with as little promise, or threat, of philosophic powers as could well be conceived. A few days later, he wrote the fragment of his *Ode to Maia*. He is going to finish it, he tells Reynolds, ‘all in good time’. He neither finished it, nor finished nor began, for six months, any piece which adds anything to his repute. *Isabella* had been written amid the misgivings of a temperament in which a just instinct for the luxurious contended with the ambition of philosophic thinking. The mood which had sustained its perfections was spent. In sending a specimen of it to Reynolds, Keats speaks of it as ‘bound up in the shadows of the mind’, and emphasizes its remoteness from ‘our matters of human life’.<sup>1</sup> That it had the note of ‘great verse’, he was not persuaded. In the *Ode to Maia*, which follows

<sup>1</sup> ib., p. 102.

immediately upon the finishing of it, he speaks of himself as proposing to 'leave great verse unto a little clan', the Miltos and the Wordsworths. The letter<sup>1</sup> in which the Ode is enclosed is full of interest, and parts of it are well known; but it is another of those letters of which the connexions are apt to be missed. I shall make no apology for trying to exhibit these connexions.

*Isabella* has brought its necessary reactions; and these have been reinforced by depressing reflections connected with the illness of his brother Tom. Reynolds himself has been ill; and Keats has been 'in so uneasy a state of mind as not to be fit to write to an invalid . . . I should have loaded you with an addition of gloom'. *Isabella* is finished, and Keats is anxious to see Reynolds' Boccaccio tales—*Isabella* was part of a joint enterprise of versifying tales from Boccaccio.<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, however, had written that he found poetry and the professional study of the Law incompatible; and this gives Keats the text for a sermon upon the relations between poetry and knowledge. For himself, he feels that of no kind of knowledge would the bias 'make the least difference in his poetry', i.e. make it less poetry. Yet for the

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, pp. 101-9.

<sup>2</sup> An enterprise, the idea of which sprang, I have suggested elsewhere, from Hazlitt's lecture upon Dryden (*Times Literary Supplement*, 19 March 1925).

poet knowledge performs an important service. 'It takes away the heat and fever, and helps, by inducing speculation, to ease the burden of the mystery' (these last words an echo of Wordsworth). The life of poetry is that of sensations—the old theme—here qualified as 'high sensations'. 'The difference of high sensations with and without knowledge appears to me to be this: in the latter case we are continually falling ten thousand fathoms deep, and being blown up again, without wings, and with all the horror of a bare-shouldered creature: in the former case, our shoulders are fledged, and we go through the same air and space without fear.'

The ingenious metaphor has the advantage, or disadvantage, that it leaves the problem of the relation between the senses and thought, or knowledge, just where it was, and Keats apologizes for a sentence which merely 'treads the water'. 'When we come to human life and the affections', he continues, 'it is impossible to know how a comparison between breast and head can be drawn.' Then, reverting to the thought of his brother, 'It is impossible to know how far knowledge will console us for the death of a friend'. 'With respect to the affections and poetry, you must know by sympathy my thoughts . . .' Then follows the *Ode to Maia*, which 'will be but a ratification' of what Reynolds already knows.

The connexion of ideas is obscure. But the Ode speaks of its poet as 'leaving great verse', and as content to be the poet of the beauty of the world. The poetry, I think Keats means, in which thought and knowledge work together with the senses—and the poetry, again, which finds a philosophy of suffering—is for a different order of poets. That leads him to Milton and Wordsworth. He marks 'Milton's apparently less anxiety for humanity'. But he is not sure whether this comes from a less or, in fact, a greater insight—as I think, a fine critical observation. Wordsworth, perhaps, 'martyrs himself to the human heart' (again, a fine thought finely phrased). From his own recent experience of sickness, Keats has learned that 'knowledge is sorrow'. 'And I go on to say that sorrow is wisdom.' Then he adds perversely, 'And further, for aught we can know for certainty, wisdom is folly'. The rest of the paragraph runs off into a hundred perversities and sillinesses. But these notwithstanding, we can discover, I think, premonitions here of a somewhat later mood, the mood of *Hyperion: A Vision*. For the poetry which proceeds from 'an exquisite sense of the luxurious', for poetry like the just completed *Isabella*, Keats has no use; and for philosophic poetry, no aptitude. And yet his recent familiarity with bodily distress sets him reflecting upon that order of poetry which draws its strength from

suffering: upon the kind of poetry of which Moneta speaks in *Hyperion: A Vision*:

None can usurp this height, returned that Shade,  
But those to whom the miseries of the world  
Are misery, and will not let them rest.

The remainder of the letter is occupied with the famous simile of the Chambers of Human Life. There is, first, the Thoughtless Chamber, which is the life of mere sensation; then the Chamber of Maiden Thought, in which delight in the world of sense, joy in nature, becomes a self-conscious passion, this self-consciousness 'sharpening our vision into the heart and nature of man'—and not merely doing that, but, by a process the character of which Keats insufficiently illuminates, 'convincing our nerves that the world is full of misery and heart-break, pain, sickness, and oppression'. From this Chamber there open out 'many doors': 'but all dark, all leading to dark passages'. The greatness of Wordsworth lies in the manner in which his genius is 'explorative of these dark passages'. 'Now if we live and go on thinking, we too shall explore them.'

Thus he ends, at least, upon a note of high seriousness, falling back, without much heed of consistency, upon the old faith in thinking, in a philosophic poetry. Yet this is no longer a poetry of *mere* metaphysics; but a poetry essentially human, inspired by, and addressed to, the needs of suffering

man. If in all this any one is forward to mark what is said amiss, and to discover muddled thinking, I shall not be at pains to defend Keats. I think, indeed, that he is throughout talking poetry, and supposing himself to be talking philosophy.

This letter was written at the very beginning of May; and the six months that follow are the least productive period of Keats' life. Six weeks of them are filled by the Scottish tour. During those six weeks Keats had with him, as his only reading, a copy of Cary's *Dante*. When he returned to London he returned to the conditions under which he had written to Reynolds in May; that is to say, to watching his brother's sufferings, and to meditating a poetry which should discover in itself some philosophy of suffering. On September 21,<sup>1</sup> he writes to Dilke: 'I wish I could say Tom was any better. His identity presses upon me so all day that I am obliged to go out; and although I had intended to have given some time to study alone, I am obliged to write and plunge into abstract images . . . so that I live now in a continual fever. . . . If I think of fame, of poetry, it seems a crime to me, and yet I must do so or suffer.' The next day, as it seems, he writes to Reynolds:<sup>2</sup> 'This morning, poetry has conquered. I have relapsed into those abstractions which are my only life. I feel escaped from a new strange and

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, p. 164

<sup>2</sup> ib., p. 165.

threatening sorrow, and I am thankful for it. There is an awful warmth about my heart like a load of immortality.'

The new-conquering poetry, the 'abstract images', the 'abstractions which are my only life', announce the beginnings of *Hyperion*. There is nothing else in the period to which they *can* refer; and a fortnight later the reference to *Hyperion* becomes explicit—Keats speaks of himself to Woodhouse<sup>1</sup> as 'cogitating on the characters of Ops and Saturn'. I do not think it worth while to stay to refute the view of Miss Lowell that this *Hyperion* is *Hyperion: A Vision*. I will content myself with noticing that *Hyperion: A Vision* contains no word of Ops—Ops belongs to the greater *Hyperion*. By what confused processes Miss Lowell has been carried back to an old and exploded error, it is impossible, from what she herself says, to divine. But there is this much to be said for her, though it has not occurred to her to say it. *Hyperion: A Vision* is, in a sense, a far truer reflection of the mood of this period than the other *Hyperion*. Not only had Keats just been reading Cary's *Dante* (entitled by the translator, be it observed, *The Vision of Dante*); not only does Moneta's speech in the *Vision* echo, as I have noticed already, some sentences of Keats' letter to Reynolds of May 3rd; but the circum-

<sup>1</sup> ib., p. 184.

stances of the period September–October seem to recreate those of the preceding May. Everything prepares us for *Hyperion: A Vision*. I am not sure, indeed, that Keats did not, in fact, begin from that end; that he did not, in these months, *conceive* something like the *Vision*. By that I mean no more than what Mr. Bridges means when he says that the first *Hyperion*, like the *Vision*, must have had 'an inner meaning—for it is impossible that Keats would have forced into an allegory a poem which he had conceived and written without any such intention'.<sup>1</sup> This first *Hyperion* proceeds from conditions which should have produced the second. To Keats, it is 'a kind of crime', the crime, in fact, of *not* being the *Vision*, of not being a poem reaching after some philosophy of human suffering. To us, of course, it is a main part of the greatness of the poem—and of the mystery of poetry—that it thus rises clear of its circumstances. The first *Hyperion*, like *Isabella*, is true to poetry only by being mysteriously false to the conditions of its origin.

### III

*Hyperion*, then, was begun in September–October of 1818, among the circumstances of distress connected with the illness of Tom Keats. On Decem-

<sup>1</sup> *Muses Library*, i, p. 1.

ber 1 Tom died. A letter of December 24<sup>1</sup> announces Keats' intention to resume poetry. 'I must begin again with my poetry . . . I live under an everlasting restraint, never relieved except when I am composing, so I will write away.' The day following records<sup>2</sup> the resumption of *Hyperion*; 'but it will take some time to get into the vein again'. On December 31<sup>3</sup> the poem, he writes, is 'scarce begun'. It is spoken of as 'scarce begun' because the conception of the longer *Vision* was present from the beginning. The same letter contains a memorable sentence: 'I never can feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its beauty.' The words mark a change of temper; they seem to end the false direction of the months preceding; to prepare us for the abandonment of philosophic epic, and for a return to the inspiration of the senses. And in fact the spirit of them pervades and informs the months that follow—eight golden months. On February 14<sup>4</sup> Keats tells his brother that he has 'not gone on with *Hyperion*'; he had, in fact, in January, already begun on *The Eve of St. Agnes*—on February 14 it was in an advanced state.

*The Eve of St. Agnes* has its origins in the same 'exquisite sense of the luxurious' as that from which *Isabella* was born. It takes us back to the Keats

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, p. 194.

<sup>3</sup> ib., p. 200.

whom we know; the true Keats, as I think; the effective poet; yet a poet effective, it may be, only in a certain ineffectiveness. Both poems represent, as it were, a kind of relapse into sense and luxury: the relapse of a temperament laboriously aspiring towards harder and sharper effects, the realities of thinking and suffering, aspiring towards those unsustainable heights, but for ever falling back upon 'the shadows of the mind', 'the abstractions which are my only life'. It lies outside my purpose to attempt to reconstruct the psychological conditions of these 'fallings away'—for so Keats himself, plainly, conceives them; they 'seem a crime' to him. Such reconstruction lies outside my purpose; even should some gayer talent essay it, I should be sceptical of what the attempt might achieve; just now, I am not sure but what the criticism of poetry would be the better if it took a psychological holiday. It is safer merely to mark what happens; and not always easy to do even that. It is not easy, perhaps not possible, to say what elements of greatness, of poetry, in *Isabella*, or *The Eve of St. Agnes*—what elements, or whether any—have their explanation in the strong contrast between the mood which created them and the mood preceding. I suppose that every one who reads either of these beautiful pieces has, as part of his experience, the sense of being elaborately fenced from all infection

of reality. Will the frail outworks hold? or before we finish, before our satisfactions are rounded off, will the storm of life break in upon us? There is *that* feeling of pleased suspense; and it enhances, I think, our perception of the art which holds us. That is one of the elements in either of these compositions which I should suppose to proceed from the conditions under which both were made. Yet poetry is wiser, not only than those who read it, but than those who make it; and I would not attach to this kind of observation too much value. It is of more value to observe that the mood which, in the months preceding the spring of 1819, created *The Eve of St. Agnes* sustains itself right down to September. It is true that a letter of March 19<sup>1</sup> describes a condition of indolence in which 'neither poetry nor ambition nor love have any alertness of countenance as they pass me by' (the mood and sentiment of the *Ode on Indolence*): a 'state of effeminacy', Keats calls it, plainly. It is true that on June 9 he tells Miss Jeffrey<sup>2</sup> that he has been 'very idle lately'. 'You will judge of my 1819 temper when I tell you that the thing I have most enjoyed this year has been writing an Ode to

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, p. 235. Too much has been made of this letter, which, in fact, describes the mood of a single morning, though that its effects were in some degree lasting the *Ode on Indolence* may itself be taken to indicate.

<sup>2</sup> Lowell, ii. 257.

Indolence!' Yet this '1819 temper' may be better judged than by the information supplied to Miss Jeffrey. Of the months of March and April we know little; but when we fill the blank with Keats' own phrases—'delightful sensation', 'effeminacy', 'indolence'—it is at least likely that these hit a mood for which another poet—Wordsworth, for example—or Keats himself in some other context—would have found some higher name, 'wise passivity', or the like. They indicate, perhaps, not much more than a holiday from *thinking*—and it is when Keats indulges that kind of vacation that he is most a poet, most himself. At any rate, in April and May of this year were written all the great Odes save *Autumn*. To April belongs *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, that epitome of the romantic temper: to the same month most, perhaps, of the 1819 Sonnets. Some parts of the spring must have been given to *Hyperion*; though before the summer ended he was embarrassing himself with *Hyperion: A Vision*. In July and August *Lamia* was written, the creative impulse so far lasting on as to suffice in September for the *Ode to Autumn* and for the last touches to *The Eve of St. Agnes*. The first eight months of 1819 have, in fact, some claim to be regarded as Keats' golden period. They contain certainly one misdirection of talent, *Otho*.<sup>1</sup> The composition of *Otho*

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, p. 294.

falls into the same period (July–Aug.) as that of *Lamia*. Keats thought *Lamia* his best piece—he placed it first in the volume of 1820—‘I am certain that there is that sort of fire in it that must take hold of people some way’.<sup>1</sup> And he was well pleased with *Otho*. *Otho* was to be tried out on the stage. But from the volume of 1820 it was his intention to exclude *Isabella*. ‘He could not bear it now; it seemed to him mawkish’, he told Woodhouse.<sup>2</sup> It may be presumed that it is to Woodhouse that it owes its place in the 1820 volume. *Hyperion*, similarly, owes its place there to Taylor and Hessey—‘the publishers beg to state that they alone are responsible, as it was printed at their particular request, and contrary to the wish of the author’. The wish of the author was, no doubt, to re-fashion it along the lines of *Hyperion: A Vision*—a task upon which he was actually engaged in the last months of 1819: he had, indeed, begun upon it in the golden months of that year. Of both the beauties and the defects of *The Eve of St. Agnes* Keats had a fairly just perception. The poem lacked ‘character and sentiment’. ‘I am more at home’, he writes<sup>3</sup> to his publisher, ‘among men and women. I would rather read Chaucer than Ariosto. The little dramatic skill I may as yet have, however

<sup>1</sup> ib.

<sup>2</sup> Lowell, ii. 317.

<sup>3</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, p. 333.

badly it might shew in a drama, would, I think, be sufficient for a poem. I wish to diffuse the colouring of *St. Agnes' Eve* throughout a poem in which character and sentiment would be the figures to such drapery. Two or three such poems . . . would nerve me up to the writing of a few fine plays—my greatest ambition, when I do feel ambitious.' That was written in November; but this wrongheadedness of dramatic ambition dates from July—August. It is the reaction from *St. Agnes' Eve*; it marks a flight from that purely ideal world in which Keats is never happy to be at home, running always from his own perfections as from a kind of guilt. 'I am more at home among men and women!' The truth is that, say what he may, make what poetry he will, the mere shadow of a man or woman, the least breath of character or action, suffices at any moment to dissolve the fabric of his imaginings. This is true, not merely when he essays drama or narrative, or the philosophic epic, it is equally true when he attempts that species of poetry for which we might have thought him most genuinely qualified—the lyric of personal passion. The question has been a good deal debated, whether he wrote better or worse when he was near Fanny Brawne. Sir Sidney Colvin has answered it one way, and Miss Lowell another. Any one who knows, either who is who, or what is what, will easily guess the lines of

difference. But the question was not worth asking, for upon whatever page of Keats' poetry there falls the shadow of a living woman, it falls calamitously like an eclipse. The so-called *Last Sonnet* is, no doubt, all that it has been felt to be by lovers of Keats' poetry; and it seems wanton to say the whole truth about it. Yet the oftener I read it, the more does the contrast force itself upon my attention between the lofty, the almost heroic, gravity of its opening lines, and the inferior effects in which it closes. Than the first six verses of it, it is hard to conceive more perfect speech:

Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art,  
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,  
And watching, with eternal lids apart,  
Like Nature's patient sleepless eremite,  
The moving waters at their priestlike task  
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,

every line 'steadfast' and 'eternal'; but what remains of the octave wavers:

Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask  
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors.

Then in the line

No, yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,  
the whole recovers for a moment its just poise, only  
to suffer, in the remaining five verses, disastrous  
collapse:

Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast,  
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,  
    Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,  
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,  
    And so live ever, or else swoon to death.

That is what I mean when I speak of the shadow of a living woman falling always upon Keats' verse like an eclipse. But he would never believe it. Let the mad poets, he writes in *Lamia*,

Let the mad poets say whate'er they please  
Of the sweets of Fairies, Peris, goddesses,  
There is not such a treat among them all  
As a real woman.

That the same man could write like that, and elsewhere write poetry, we can only believe by finding it to be so. But the fact is that nowhere in Keats are we safe from these relapses upon the real. No sooner has he, in the world of pure imaginative forms, achieved some characteristic perfection, than the old hunger and thirst for 'reality' assails him. Philosophy, politics, action, character—all these are for ever calling him from his proper effectiveness to regions of enterprise where he can be only inefficient and unhappy. Nothing in *Otho*, nor even in the fragment *King Stephen*—which has been thought to show some advance in power—nothing in either of these pieces persuades me that Keats possessed those robust talents which make

drama. Neither does *Lamia* lead me to believe that in narrative poetry, in poetry, that is, in which a story is told, Keats was ever likely to achieve a success worth having. *Lamia*, as I think, he himself somewhat overrated. It has, indeed, a swiftness and brightness which are new in his art; and in versification it achieves more of masculinity than he elsewhere masters. Criticism has been a good deal intrigued about the intention of the poem, the moral of it. Where are our sympathies, or where should they be? where are Keats' sympathies? For myself, I do not know that Keats could have pointed the moral more sharply than he has done:

What wreath for Lamia, what for Lycius?  
What for the sage, old Apollonius?  
Upon her aching forehead be there hung  
The leaves of willow and of adder's tongue;  
And for the youth, quick, let us strip for him  
The thyrsus, that his watching eyes may swim  
Into forgetfulness; and for the sage  
Let spear-grass and the spiteful thistle wage  
War on his temples. Do not all charms fly  
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?  
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:  
We know her woof, her texture; she is given  
In the dull catalogue of common things.  
Philosophy will clip an angel's wings,  
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,  
Empty the haunted air, the gnomed mine—

Unweave a rainbow, as it erstwhile made  
The tender-personed Lamia melt into a shade.

But it is all too sharply said for Keats' critics. Even Sir Sidney Colvin takes offence. He cannot bear that philosophy should win no better wreath than spear-grass and the thistle. Keats, he urges, in a tone of grave rebuke, 'should have realized that the discoveries of "philosophy", meaning science, leave the world of poetry as they found it'. Keats, moreover, asks us, he supposes, 'to take sides with the enchantress'; and even the wreath of Lycius is, for this critic, 'of ominous growth'. No word of this mystification do I understand. When and where does Keats ask us 'to take sides with the enchantress'? We are told, it is true, in the last lines, that philosophy will as lightly unweave a rainbow—the worst of crimes—as it melted Lamia to a shade, which was no more than her deserts. No sympathy is wasted on Lamia: willow and adder's tongue are her proper portion for ever. Of Lycius the perfect wreath is the thyrsus, the emblem of inspiration, of poetry—to the end that

his watching eyes may swim  
Into forgetfulness:

that, like all poets, whose life is in sensation, in beauty, he may fade 'far away, dissolve and quite forget' all that is less real than that. That all which philosophy inherits is the thistle and spear-grass—

that, again, is not a dogma that should take us by surprise in Keats. In the period to which *Lamia* belongs—those eight golden months in which Keats' genius flourished in the fullness of pure sensuous experience, escaped from that craving for thought which, besetting him at so many other times, spoiled his singing—it would surprise me if in this period this dogma did *not* find expression.

This is not to say that I think the moral of *Lamia* good morals, that it satisfies the demands of a complete humanity. But I think it tolerable poetry; and I see no reason for wishing to make intolerable prose of it. In Keats himself, after all, there was that which *Lamia* could not satisfy, nor the best of his poetry at any time. That is why he has no sooner finished *Lamia* than he takes up *Hyperion: A Vision*. I like him the better for it, but I do not think him a better poet. I think him the great poet he is only when the senses capture him, when he finds truth in beauty, that is to say, when he does not trouble to find truth at all.

With *Lamia* the period of perfect work ends—and *Lamia* itself, as I have hinted, I find less perfect than it is sometimes esteemed. Failure of bodily health—and the pains, it may be, of a love which followed all directions except those of poetry—reinduced the mood of the autumn of the preceding year: that mood to which 'the miseries of the world

are misery' and will not 'let rest' a poet in whom the capacity for joy, the joy of the senses, is the condition of creative power. I will not spend words upon *Hyperion: A Vision*. Of the other *Hyperion* I will say briefly what I think it essential to say. But I will first make, upon the volume of which it forms a part, one or two observations of a general character.

#### IV

The more I read it, the more disposed am I to think this book to be, of all the world's books, upon the whole the most marvellous. I do not say the greatest, but the most marvellous. It was finished before Keats had completed his twenty-fifth year; and there is nothing in it which is not, in its kind, a masterpiece. *Isabella*, which Lamb thought the 'finest thing' in the volume, was written when Keats was not yet twenty-three; he had just turned twenty-three when he made the first draft of *Hyperion*. Of the longer pieces, the most perfect is, I think, *The Eve of St. Agnes*—more fully there than elsewhere we feel what Matthew Arnold means when he speaks of Keats' 'perfection of loveliness'. Yet even *St. Agnes Eve* must yield to the Odes. The Odes stand apart, if for no other reason, yet because in them, for the first time, Keats finds his own manner. In the other parts of

the volume, great as they are, he is still without a manner which is wholly and distinctively his own. His own it is, of course, in so far as genius makes its own whatever it takes. Yet that the versification of *Lamia* is fetched from Dryden, that *St. Agnes Eve* looks back to Spenser, that *Hyperion* is more Miltonic than it has any right to be (which was, indeed, why Keats was dissatisfied with it),<sup>1</sup> all this it is impossible not to feel. But in the Odes, as I say, Keats finds, he for the first time finds, his own manner.

I shall return to the Odes. But placed where they are, between the three completed narrative poems and the unfinished *Hyperion*, they force upon us a question to which there is no certain answer. From first to last, the imagination of Keats was haunted by the conception of 'the long poem'. This passion for grand-scale effects, I have sometimes thought, he may have caught from Haydon, who had the temperament only for large canvases. 'A long poem', Keats writes, as early as October 1817, 'is a test of Invention, which I take to be the

<sup>1</sup> See Colvin, *Letters*, p. 321: 'I have given up *Hyperion*—there were too many Miltonic inversions in it—Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful, or rather artist's, humour. I wish to give myself up to other sensations.' Compare ib., pp. 313–14: 'I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written, but is the verse of art.'

Polar star of Poetry, as Fancy is the sails—and Imagination the rudder.<sup>1</sup> Again, at the beginning of 1819, 'It is my intention', he says, 'to wait a few years before I publish any minor poems; and then I hope to have a volume of some worth, and which those people will relish who cannot bear the burthen of a long poem'.<sup>2</sup> Happily, he waited, not 'a few years', but a few months—the 'volume of some worth' is the volume of 1820. The third and final section of it, which contains *Hyperion*, serves to remind us that the rest of the book, and, indeed, all Keats' other studies in poetry, are studies subsidiary only, and preliminary, to 'the long poem'. That this continuous meditation would have issued, had he lived longer, in a poetic achievement answering to his ambition, we have no assurance. Any hints of it, such as we are right to seize upon greedily, must be sought, in any case, not from *Hyperion*, but from the Odes. The whole of Keats' work, be it remembered, was done in a space of less than four years, the best of it within the limits of a single year—at all points the rapidity of his development is amazing. He ends, save for the Odes, still a conscious imitator of the manner of other poets. That he could never have rested there, the Odes make certain. Inevitably, in some other species, he must have found, before long, a manner as indi-

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, pp. 34-5.

<sup>2</sup> ib., p. 205.

vidual as that which he has attained in the Odes. That he could have carried this individual manner to success in composition of a large compass, in the narrative or heroic species, I do not feel certain.

That there was nothing to be made of *Hyperion*, that, for all its grave epic beauty, it could not have been carried farther, that it promises no true development—of this I do feel certain. I feel certain of it for two reasons, both of which are well expressed in Mr. Bridges' penetrating study of Keats. First, 'the subject', says Mr. Bridges,<sup>1</sup> 'lacks the solid basis of outward event by which epic maintains its interest; there is little but imagination, and a one-sidedness or incompleteness of that; a languor which, though it has now generally left the language, lingers in the main design'. Secondly, *Hyperion*, as I have already noticed, is equally with *Hyperion: A Vision*, in design, allegorical. To speak well of allegoric poetry, to speak of it with more than forced kindness, neither Spenser nor the Spenserians nor Keats himself shall ever persuade me. It is all very well for Hazlitt to say of the *Faerie Queene* that the allegory will not bite any one. All allegory bites—bites into the nobler vitals of poetry. Of timid minds brought up against facts, and too conscientious to ignore them altogether, allegory is, in all periods, the natural refuge. How

<sup>1</sup> pp. xli–xlii.

early in the history of criticism religious men ran from the Bible to allegory, as though, not allegory, but the Bible, would bite them, is a part of the natural history of exegesis. Just so, from the Irish Question, and from the Papacy, and from a hundred other perplexities, the shy soul of Spenser sought refuge in allegory.

It was partly that, in running to allegory, he ran to Spenser, but in part shyness of the actual, that determined for Keats the form, first, if it has one, of *Endymion*, and subsequently of *Hyperion*. I have spoken already of Keats' early revolutionary sympathies, of his Huntian or Wordsworthian politics. I said that these sympathies went deeper, and lasted longer, than is usually recognized. Keats, I said, is more the child of the Revolutionary Idea than we commonly suppose. That is true, even in politics. But the Revolutionary Idea is neither wholly, nor primarily, political. Of the multifarious manifestations of this idea Keats undertook to write, what no other of the romantics essayed, the epic. So at least I conceive *Hyperion*—as, under allegoric forms, the epic of the Revolutionary Idea. In history, as in mythology, the Revolutionary Idea begins when children refuse any longer to be eaten by their parents. There is that in nature which will not be eaten by custom; and there is that in poetry which will not be eaten by prose; and whether

what happens be figured as Jove deposing Saturn, or the French Revolution dethroning the Ancien Régime, Apollo ousting Hyperion, or Wordsworth dispossessing Pope, or, again, beauty dispossessing order, imagination replacing reason, matters hardly at all; in each event the same causes operate. Somewhat thus, I take it, Keats conceived his epic of the Revolutionary Idea. Exactly how he had it in mind to distribute the emphasis, ingenuity may be harmlessly exercised in guessing; but if Keats himself stopped because he did not know how to go on, it would be nothing out of nature, and perhaps, indeed, out of nature if it were otherwise. It is notable that, in the story as he tells it, Apollo is the last of the gods to establish his power. The poem waits upon his advent; and upon his advent, and activity, depends, we feel, the unravelling of the dramatic complex. Neither can the New Order work without him, nor the reconciliation be brought about of new and old. Jove, we may suppose, figures the civil power, the institutions of political life. These are workable only so far as the context of them can be poetized; and so far as they are new, they require a new poetry. Hyperion is the last of the Titans to fall before the new order; of the old order, that is, there lives longest, and last leaves the heart, its poetry. It is in the nature of things that periodic storms of time should shatter material

institutions, the laboriously built fabric of tradition and habit. But over the wreck there still lingers for awhile some ghost of beauty and poetry; the 'still undisgraced radiance' of Hyperion. But Hyperion cannot stay; or he stays only to view

The misery his radiance has betrayed  
To the most hateful seeing of itself.

Saturn may boast that

there shall be  
Beautiful things made new for the surprise  
Of the sky-children;

but he knows in his heart that this creation can be the work only of some new power of beauty, some new poetry, some Apollo. Hyperion has outlived his world. The hope which the elder gods repose in him is, say they what they may, half-hearted; and in fact the order which they represent has fallen from their want of faith in him, or from a mutual breach of sympathy.

Apollo, the usurping god of light, the new poetry, comes to deity in a fashion sufficiently significant. Keats carries the poem no farther than the beginnings of his god-head. But sufficiently far that we know that this god-head is not without its birth-pangs:

Soon wild commotions shook him, and made flush  
All the immortal fairness of his limbs,  
Most like the struggle at the gates of death;

and he speaks of him plainly as 'dying into life'.

Of this birth-anguish of Apollo, with which *Hyperion* ends, we must fetch the interpretation, I should suppose, from *Hyperion: A Vision*. Alike of the god of poetry *and of the poet upon earth* this is true, that their living must be by dying. It is not by accident, I mean, that, on the one hand, *Hyperion* ends thus with the death-shriek of Apollo, with this anguish of the god dying into life, and that, on the other hand, all the emphasis of the later version is thrown on the necessity for the poet of seeing the beauty of the world through its sorrows, through human suffering:

None can usurp his height, returned that Shade,  
But those to whom the miseries of the world  
Are misery, and will not let them rest.

In other words, I take the revolutionary Apollo to contrast, in Keats' imagination, with the god whom he dispossesses, as humanitarian with visionary. Again and again does Keats, as we have seen, carry us to this opposition of two kinds of poetry—and shrink back from his own conclusions. I will not say that *Hyperion* remains, and was bound to remain, the fragment that it is, merely because Keats cannot bring himself to point the moral which he has so far drawn. That fear of himself, that uneasiness, operates. But it is part of a wider perplexity. I should prefer to conceive that Keats, pursuing his epic of the Revolutionary Idea, trailing, as he went,

clouds of indeterminate allegory, was held by that death-shriek, or birth-shriek, of his own Apollo; that he was startled into misgiving; that some disquiet of the creating imagination assailed him; that he felt himself brought up sharply against the need of defining, the need of clarifying his own conception. What truly was this god, who thus dies into life? and into what order of life does this dying in fact conduct him?

*Hyperion*, the *Hyperion* of the volume of 1820, leaves the question without answer; indeed, that it puts the question we should scarcely know except for *Hyperion: A Vision*. It is even possible that in the version printed in 1820 Keats was trying to save his work out of allegory. It could not be done, and he gave up, recurring in the last months of 1819 to allegory unshamed. The recoil of intention leaves the greater of the two poems a fragment of statuesque beauty. Some mist and soil allegory does throw about it. That this is not so much as to impair vitally its beauty of outline and largeness of conception—that is just God's mercy, never wanting to poets.

## V

I turn, as I promised, to the Odes. I suppose the Odes to be that part of Keats' poetry about which there is no doubt at all. Whatever else in his work

is faulty, whatever else touched with decadence, these at least have immortal quality, these at least are exempt from cavil. That they should be exempt from comment, that they have that absolute character which asks only our 'wonder and astonishment', and not the 'weak witness' of words, of gloss and exegesis, this, if we might allow it of any poetry, we might allow of the Odes. And we might appeal plausibly to the testimony of Keats himself, who, in a well-known letter,<sup>1</sup> has hazarded the dictum that 'all poems should explain themselves without any comment'. But that is only as true of poetry as of all other inspired work, and under the same condition; the condition, namely, that it is addressed to hearts, and to an intelligence, perfectly attuned to the effects of style. That most poetry better explains itself with no comment at all than with the kind of commentary which is commonly attached to it—that we can all believe, and not much more than that I suppose Keats to have wished to say. Certainly so minute a student of poetical effects, whose ear and eye and heart kept such anxious watch for the subtler beauties of his art, did not intend that, from a casual sentence in one of his letters, we should fetch an excuse for reading any poetry inattentively, with an indolent mind or a slack imagination. Of Keats' own letters,

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, p. 203.

after all, a large part of the charm lies in the wealth of comment which they supply upon some of the great passages of English poetry.

Let me say, then, quite simply, that I think the Odes of Keats worth *study*, worth, that is, some pains of scholarship. However inapposite we may feel it to be when, in respect of work of which *natural beauty* seems to be the dominant character, it is attempted to trace connexions, to reconstitute a process of development, it is yet true that study is the parent of appreciation. If the Odes of Keats are as perfect as I think them, and as they are accounted, they deserve to call forth in us some better element than our faculty for gush. It is idle to suppose ourselves the students of poetry, when we are in fact only its voluptuaries.

I shall make no apology, therefore, for devoting to the Odes a space disproportionate to the scale of the rest of these lectures; nor, again, for considering them somewhat minutely from the side of technique. Not all the Odes, of course, reward equally the zeal of minute scholarship; for the volume of 1820 does not exhaust Keats' essays in this kind. But I shall try to bestow my pains where they are best paid. I think them ill-paid, for example, by the *Ode to Apollo*; and almost equally ill-paid by the *Hymn to Apollo*. I mention these pieces here and now, not merely in order to be rid of them, but

because to mention them is to put plainly a question which it is as well to try and determine at once. What does Keats mean by an Ode? Which among his poems *are* the Odes? The *Ode to Apollo* is among the very earliest of his compositions. The *Hymn* belongs, perhaps, to the end of the year 1816. That the one piece is called an Ode, the other a Hymn, has, so far as I know, no better explanation than the convenience, or even the whim, of editors. The *Hymn* is called an Ode by Woodhouse, and a 'Fragment of an Ode' in the first Woodhouse Common-place Book.<sup>1</sup> Neither poem was printed by Keats himself; but that he would have been content to call either an Ode, that both of them, at the time when they were written, corresponded to his conception of what an Ode was, there is no reason to doubt. I think it likely that he would have been equally content to give the title Ode to the lines *On a Lock of Milton's Hair*; and the piece is classed by Mr. Bridges among the Odes. Keats himself neither gave these lines a title, nor printed them—they date from the beginning of the year 1818: a year in which his conception of the nature of an Ode began, I think, to change. In May of this year he wrote the famous fragment of an *Ode to Maia*. This, again, he never printed; but in a letter to Reynolds he speaks of the poem plainly as an Ode—

<sup>1</sup> Amy Lowell, *John Keats*, p. 69.

‘I intend to finish the Ode all in good time’. The ‘good time’ never came. The first impulse towards this fragment was given, I think—though I cannot find that any one has noted it—by the *Ode to Maia* of Barnabe Barnes. ‘Lovely Maia, Hermes’ mother’, Barnes begins; ‘Mother of Hermes, and still youthful Maia’, Keats, committing himself over-adventurously. I say ‘over-adventurously’, not to complain of him for rhyming, as he presently does, *Maia* with *Baiae*—better poets have used worse rhymes—but because I do not know (and I find in the commentators only a disgraceful conspiracy of silence)—I do not know who in fact the poets were who, on the shores of Baiae, hymned Maia. If Keats is thinking of Virgil, the references to Maia in Virgil are only incidental, and belong to the *Aeneid*, not, as seems suggested by the conjunction with the poets who sang ‘in earlier Sicilian’, to the *Eclogues*. Nor do I know any Sicilian poet who celebrates Maia. What is said of the Grecian Isles may be conveniently referred to the Hymn to Hermes of the *Chian* Homer. But on the whole I am inclined to think words stronger than those who use them, and that Keats said more than he knew.

This much in parenthesis, and to illustrate the manner in which commentators sometimes throw light upon all places save the dark ones. What matters is that this is the earliest poem of Keats of

which we can say certainly that he himself called it an Ode. The most obvious circumstance in connexion with the form of it is that its fourteen lines less resemble an Ode than a sonnet; a sonnet divergating widely, it is true, from pattern; sestet and octave are in inverted order, and the second, fourth, and thirteenth lines are reduced to two feet, the eleventh to three; yet in form and manner the piece is more like a sonnet than anything else; a sonnet 'dying proudly', as Keats conceived that the sonnet should, in its final cadences. The significance of this approximation to sonnet-form is best seen when we turn to the volume of 1820.

The volume of 1820 contains the only poems which Keats himself published under the title of Odes. Yet the term Ode is used in this book in such a way as at once to create difficulty. The volume begins with *Lamia*, *Isabella*, the *Eve of St. Agnes*. There follows a separate section, entitled Poems; in which the *Ode to a Nightingale* holds the place of primacy. Immediately after it come the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and the *Ode to Psyche*. Next come four pieces of heptasyllabic verse, *Fancy*, 'Bards of Passion', the *Lines on the Mermaid Tavern*, and *Robin Hood*. The section closes with the stanzas *To Autumn* and the *Ode on Melancholy*. By Keats' commentators, but not by Keats, the stanzas *To Autumn* are called an Ode. I say, not by Keats, and

I mean, not in the volume of 1820. The volume of 1820, denying to these stanzas the title Ode, gives it strangely to 'Bards of Passion'. It is true that the heptasyllabic couplet had been used for Ode already, not only in the eighteenth century but earlier. It had been used, in fact, by a poet of whom Keats was a close student, Drayton. Nevertheless, the name Ode, given in the volume of 1820 (without authority from any of our MSS.) to 'Bards of Passion,' is, I would suggest, a mere blunder of the printers. 'Bards of Passion' and *Fancy* are both given in Keats' journal as 'specimens of a sort of rondeau'.<sup>1</sup> He seems, as Sir Sidney Colvin suggests,<sup>2</sup> to conceive of a rondeau as 'any set of verses returning upon itself at the end with a repetition of its beginning'. This is an inadequate conception, certainly; but at least it takes us from, not towards, the Ode; while the lightness of the measure, and the slight quality of the thought and sentiment in these pieces, contrast with those characters of 'grandeur' and weight which Keats postulates for the Ode:

Who found for me the grandeur of the Ode,  
Growing, like Atlas, stronger from its load?

The title Ode must, I think, have strayed to 'Bards of Passion' from the stanzas *To Autumn*, as a consequence of some re-arrangement of order in the 1820 volume.

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, p. 207.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Keats*,<sup>3</sup> p. 388.

Reckoning *To Autumn* with the Odes, we have, in that volume, five Odes in all, each exhibiting connexions of metre and manner which deserve study. These are all the Odes which Keats himself saw fit to publish; unless we include among the Odes the four lyric passages from *Endymion*, the Hymns, namely, to Pan, to Neptune, to Diana, and the invocation to Sorrow. Of these four pieces I will say here and now what I have in mind to say; and it will mostly concern the first of them, the Hymn to Pan.<sup>1</sup> This poem has always been praised, but I am not sure that even so it has had its full due from criticism. An Ode it is not. Save that six of its seventy-five lines are reduced to three feet, and one line to two feet, it is written in heroic couplets. The manner in which Keats has managed to infuse into these heroics a lyrical quality is in itself worth study. But the five stanzas of this Hymn mark, as I think, the highest point to which Keats' imagination had, at the time when they were written, attained. Faults of diction are not many (the epithets 'yellow-girted', 253, 'chuckling', 256, 'frothy', 270, the ill-considered 'half-sleeping fit', 265, and the misadventure 'dodge', 294—perhaps only these offend seriously); and of sentiment the lapses are very few indeed—in line 244 'By thy love's milky brow' offends, and in a characteristic fashion. The whole

<sup>1</sup> *Endymion*, i. 232 sqq.

is a riot of luxuriant paganism—albeit as little Greek as could be conceived. The deity celebrated is brought into every connexion of untamed nature which an imagination hunting always the *objectively* mysterious can compass. But the pageant of his all-pervading function culminates in the thought of him as the power which opens

the mysterious doors  
Leading to universal knowledge.

He is

still the unimaginable lodge  
For solitary thinkings,

for those thinkings, the thinkings of poetry, of which it is the characteristic that they 'dodge conception to the very bourne of heaven'. The expression is not very well adjusted. But Keats means, I take it, that these thinkings allow no formulation of themselves by the logical reason; they get to heaven without it, they cheat it, they dodge logical conception, and 'leave the naked brain'. Keats' Pan is, in fact, the symbol of romantic imagination, concrete in a thousand objective shapes, the very life itself of 'sensations rather than thoughts'.

In the Odes to Neptune in the third book of *Endymion*, to Diana in the fourth, I can discover no more than such merits as may be expected from the bad work of good poets. Of the invocation to Sorrow—for all its variety of beauty, and its power

in painting—I do not bring myself to think the excellences so many and so great as are mostly alleged. I am content to think it better than everything, save the best, of Keats.

We may swell the list of Odes, if we care to do so, by including the posthumously published *Ode to Fanny*, and the lines beginning 'What shall I do to drive away'; and we must certainly include the *Ode on Indolence*. The so-called *Ode to Fanny* was first published by Lord Houghton in 1848. The auto-graph manuscript of it is in Lord Crewe's collection, but the first and fourth stanzas are wanting to it: they are supplied from a MS. extant in Houghton's hand. I do not know what authority there is for calling the poem an Ode; and if the name Ode is to be used, I should call it, not one Ode, but two. The first stanza seems, both in theme and in metre, to be wholly unconnected with what follows. Its rhyme-schemes and its line-lengths are quite different from those of the other stanzas; and I should be surprised if the maladroitness which made one poem of these dissonant elements were not rather that of Lord Houghton than of Keats. Of the lines 'What shall I do to drive away', I shall have a word to say later. The *Ode on Indolence* is of a different character; and has close affinities with the five great Odes of the 1820 volume. 'The thing I have most enjoyed this year', says Keats in a letter to Miss

Jeffrey, 'has been writing an Ode to Indolence.'<sup>1</sup> This must not be taken too seriously; for four of the five great Odes were already written; and to any one of them *Indolence* is, I should suppose, plainly inferior. So, indeed, Keats himself must have thought—there can be no other reason for its exclusion from the 1820 volume. Mr. Bridges, it is true, seems doubtful whether to rank it above or below the *Grecian Urn*. That, I cannot but feel, is to depreciate the *Urn*, paradoxically, and to elevate *Indolence* above its merit. Yet its merit is sufficient to entitle it to be considered with the other five Odes.

Of these the earliest, it is now generally supposed, is the *Ode to Psyche*; and from the *Ode to Psyche* we ought in any case to begin. The circumstances in which it was written reveal to us more clearly than anything else Keats' technique of composition.

The Ode, as the six great Odes illustrate it, develops with Keats, not from the Ode or Hymn of the eighteenth century, but from a species which the eighteenth century despised, the sonnet. The earlier Odes look back, certainly, to that century—directly to that century, and indirectly to the Pindarics of Cowley. With the 'irregular Ode', again, as it had been practised by Wordsworth and Cole-

<sup>1</sup> Letter of June 9, 1819: Colvin, *Life*,<sup>3</sup> p. 365; Amy Lowell, ii. 257.

ridge, Keats was familiar; and the influence of it, the *priscae vestigia fraudis*, may be discerned in some of the characters of the *Ode to Psyche*. That Ode, however, is before all else interesting as marking decisively the transition to a type of quite different construction, a type built, as I say, upon the sonnet. Let me make this more plain than it has hitherto been made.

Until the end of 1817, Keats composed sonnets upon the Petrarchian pattern<sup>1</sup> exclusively—in obvious dependence on Milton and Wordsworth. In the last days of January 1818, he for the first time essayed a sonnet on the English, or Shakespearian, pattern; and followed it up in February by five others on a like model; returning to the Petrarchian pattern thereafter only thrice.<sup>2</sup> It was in May of this year that he began the unfinished *Ode to Maia*—which in its imperfect form has, as I have said, so much of the perfection of a Shakespearian sonnet. Of Keats' Shakespearian sonnets all, save three, pursue the normal pattern—the pattern invented by Surrey, adopted by Spenser in 1591, and by Watson (1593), and followed by Drayton, Daniel, and

<sup>1</sup> About one half of these Petrarchian sonnets are built upon the pattern *abba abba cdc dcd*—a pattern which predominates over any other in both Milton and Wordsworth. See Note, pp. 134 sqq.

<sup>2</sup> In the three sonnets, namely, which he wrote in Scotland.

Shakespeare, but never used by Milton or Wordsworth (nor by Hunt); the pattern, that is to say, of which the formula is *abab cdcd efef gg*. The three divergences from this pattern all occur in a letter dated April 30, 1819; and the same letter contains the *Ode to Psyche*. Of these three divergences from pattern the first is furnished by the second<sup>1</sup> of the two sonnets on Fame ('How fevered is the man . . .') —the other sonnet on the same subject ('Fame, like an idle girl . . .') is, I take it, somewhat earlier, and belongs to what the letter calls 'my old sins'. The octave of the latter sonnet is regular, but the sestet presents the variation, *ef eg gf*. The second of the diverging sonnets is that entitled *To Sleep*. It is irregular in that the sestet recurs, in its rhyme, to the octave, the pattern being *abab cdcd bc ef ef*. The object of the variations, in both examples, is made plain when the letter comes to the sonnet beginning 'If by dull rhymes . . .' 'I have been endeavouring', Keats writes, 'to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have. The legitimate (i.e. the Petrarchian) does not suit the language over well from the poun-

<sup>1</sup> Second in the editions of Keats' *Poems*, first in the letter (Buxton Forman, *Letters*, p. 338). The last sentence of the first paragraph of the letter, I do not understand. I suspect that Keats either wrote, or meant to write, 'I must employ myself perhaps in *an ode* (*a sonnet*, editors) on the same subject'. The Ode will then be that to Indolence—for which we should, thus, have a *terminus post quem*.

ing rhymes; the other kind appears too elegiac, and the couplet at the end of it seldom has a pleasing effect.' He propounds, accordingly, the rhyme-scheme *abc abd cab cde de*.

In all three experiments, he has two objects; he desires (1) to get rid of the end-couplet, which not even Shakespeare manages effectively; and (2) to free the sonnet from the semblance of three alternate-rhyming quatrains followed by such a couplet —the alternate-rhyming quatrains are the source of the too 'elegiac' character which he finds in the 'Shakespearian' sonnet. What he says of the 'pouncing rhymes' of the Petrarchian sonnet is directed, I suppose, to the effect of hurry and grab which is sometimes given by the restriction of the octave to two rhymes, and by the fact that, while lines 2-3 and 6-7 are couplet rhymes, 4-5 also make a kind of spurious couplet. A 'pouncing' manner, of course, easily results from the bad rhymes to which English is sometimes reduced from want of enough rhyming words to satisfy the demand of a two-rhyme-octave.

'I do not pretend to have succeeded', Keats writes of his experiments; and he seems, in fact, to have ceased the composition of sonnets from about this time.<sup>1</sup> In any case, the month that followed,

<sup>1</sup> See Note, pp. 134 sqq., where the proper qualifications are supplied.

May, is the month of the great Odes; and the letter containing these experiments in sonneteering contains also—as I said—the first draft of the *Ode to Psyche*. That Ode, as the letter gives it, is divided into two stanzas, the first of 35, the second of 32 lines. The 35 lines of the first stanza should have been 36; by an inadvertence, to which analogues may be found elsewhere in Keats, a line is missing after line 16, a line which should have given a rhyme-correspondence with line 15, which, in our texts, is left unrhyming.<sup>1</sup> The two stanzas of the letter are, in the edition of 1820, resolved into four. The first stanza becomes two stanzas of 24 lines and 12 lines respectively, the second two stanzas of 14 and 18 lines respectively. Of each stanza, the first eight lines are the octave of a ‘Shakespearian’ sonnet, *abab cdcd* (save that the third stanza offers the variant *abab cddc*, and that the second reduces the number of feet in its sixth and eighth lines to three). Of the first stanza, lines 1–14 make a ‘Shakespearian’ sonnet, varying only in that the sestet takes the pattern *eef eef* (that is to say, the octave is Shakespearian, the sestet Petrarchian), and that the

<sup>1</sup> A similar accident has left line 10 unrhyming in the volume of 1820. In the letter it ran

In deepest grass beneath the whisp’ring fan.

In 1820 Keats altered *fan* to *roof*, but forgot to find a rhyme for *roof*.

twelfth line is reduced to three feet. The second stanza, save for the reduction of feet noted, is a normal Shakespearian sonnet, less the end-couplet. The first 14 lines of the fourth stanza, again, make a normal Shakespearian sonnet, save that the end-couplet follows the octave instead of following the sestet.

Even so much suffices, I think, to show how this Ode, written when Keats was experimenting with the sonnet, dissatisfied in particular with the end-couplet of the Shakespearian pattern, is in fact built up out of the sonnet. A formal analysis, however, of the four stanzas will make this yet clearer. I employ the notation that is now usual, indicating the lines with reduced feet:

- I. *abab cdcd eff<sup>5</sup>e<sup>3</sup> ef<sup>5</sup>*  
*ab(a)b ccd<sup>5</sup>e<sup>3</sup> d<sup>5</sup>e<sup>2</sup>*
- II. *abab c<sup>5</sup>d<sup>3</sup>c<sup>5</sup>d<sup>3</sup> e<sup>5</sup>f<sup>3</sup>e<sup>5</sup>f<sup>3</sup>*
- III. *abab cddc<sup>5</sup> (9-10) e<sup>5</sup>f<sup>3</sup>e<sup>5</sup>f<sup>3</sup>*
- IV. *abab cdcd ee fgfg b<sup>5</sup>i<sup>3</sup>b<sup>5</sup>i<sup>3</sup>.*

(In the third stanza, lines 9-10 are rhymeless and inorganic, repeating lines 7-8 of the preceding stanza.)

The *Ode to Psyche* stands apart from the other Odes by its much greater metrical variety. Its stanzas are longer than those of any of the others, the line-lengths are diversified, of no two stanzas

is the scheme identical, and there is, in general, an approximation to the lyricism of the eighteenth-century Pindarics. This variety I take to be less the variety of the master in lyric than the vacillation of one who still handles his instrument perplexedly. Only in one other Ode of the great six do we find any variation in line-length—the *Ode to a Nightingale*; and even there it is confined to reducing the eighth line of each stanza to three feet. I would not, however, from this circumstance draw any inference as to the date at which the Nightingale Ode was composed.

The metrical pattern of that Ode, if we disregard the isolated variation in the eighth line, is the pattern of all the others, save that *To Autumn*. Each of them is built of stanzas of ten lines. These ten-lined stanzas, or dixaines, are, in fact, a kind of mutilated quatorzains, or sonnets. Keats' trouble with the Petrarchian sonnet was, as we saw, the trouble of the 'pouncing rhymes'; a trouble that resides in the octave. His trouble with the Shakespearian sonnet was twofold; its over-elegiac character, and the end-couplet. The Odes subsequent to *Psyche* offer his solution of these troubles. Each stanza of each of them, save *Autumn*, consists of the first half of the octave of a Shakespearian sonnet (that is to say, one elegiac quatrain, instead of two), followed by a Petrarchian sestet. Of the

Nightingale Ode, *Melancholy*,<sup>1</sup> *Indolence*, the scheme is  
*abab cde cde*;

that of the Grecian Urn differs only by substituting, in the sestet, *cde dce*. It is noteworthy, perhaps, that the type of sestet which predominates in Keats' early sonnets is of the pattern *cd cd cd*, upon two rhymes only. This type, which is a favourite also with Milton and Wordsworth, was too 'pounding' for his matured taste. In the Odes, accordingly, he uses the three-rhyme sestet, employing almost exclusively that type of it (*cde cde*) which he prefers in the sonnets. The *Grecian Urn* pattern (*cde dce*) occurs, in the sonnets, only in a single example (Sonnet 16).

The *Ode to Autumn*, the latest of the six great Odes, differs from all of them in employing a stanza of eleven lines. The pattern, through the first seven lines, is that of the others, *abab cde*; then follows, in the first stanza *dcce*, in the other two stanzas *cdde*. The variation between the first stanza and the other two is probably due to mere inattention; the scheme designed being that of the other Odes with the second line of the 'sestet' answered by two rhymes, a couplet, instead of by a single rhyme.

<sup>1</sup> It is, I think, mere inadvertence which has caused the last stanza of the *Ode on Melancholy* to stray, in its sestet, to the pattern of the *Grecian Urn*, *cde dce*. The rejected stanza of this Ode has *cde cde*.

This is a great deal about technique; but I cannot think it wasted. It helps to place the Odes. It frees our study of them from false associations. The Ode, I mean, is not, for Keats, a part of *singing*; and I think, in fact, that he had not the singing art. I do not know that anywhere, save in 'Drear-nighted December', he sings; and the music there is borrowed, oddly enough, from Dryden. The *Hymn to Apollo* is, no doubt, a *kind of singing*: even so, I find Miss Lowell's eulogy of its music a degree absurd; and, in any case, that Keats was little at ease there the diction witnesses.<sup>1</sup> 'O Sorrow . . .'—in *Endymion tries* to sing, if I may so speak of a famous and justly admired composition. It *tries* to sing; but it

<sup>1</sup> Let the reader consider the last lines of the first stanza:

Where, where slept thine ire,  
When like a blank idiot I put on thy wreath,  
Thy laurel, thy glory,  
The light of thy story,  
Or was I a worm—too low crawling, for death?  
O Delphic Apollo.

To Miss Lowell 'O Delphic Apollo' is 'really superb'. But save for lines 3–4, what music is there here at all? Or what, in the last lines of stanza ii:

O why didst thou pity, and beg for a worm  
Why touch thy soft lute  
Till the thunder was mute,

Why was I not crushed—such a pitiful germ?

Miss Lowell, it is true, says 'the Hymn was written for a joke' (i. 189). I do not know that anybody else has taken this view of it. But I feel sure she over-estimates the quality of its music.

will escape the notice of no one that it first becomes completely effective when its stanzas pass from song to rhymed couplets.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the Faery Song 'Shed no tear' is *nearly* a song. But in general it remains true that Keats' genius runs to most other directions than that of song. A movement graver than lyric, harmonies of which the beauty, however richly sensuous, has yet a quality of earnestness—towards verse of this kind his temperament sets strongly almost from the beginning. I leave out of account, when I say that, the misdirection of talent which is so plainly marked—which was so plainly marked for Keats himself—in his first essays in the heroic measure. Yet even there he is reaching after compass. His peril there, as he was quick to perceive, is diffusion; from the narrow scope of the closed couplet he frees himself into an infinity in which all true measure of verse is lost. I am not so sure as some critics that he escapes from this embarrassment altogether happily in *Lamia*. I am not sure, indeed, that, for what I may call continuous verse, Keats either had, or felt himself to have, the proper adjustment of temperament. There was

<sup>1</sup> Verses 218–72 are (save for 232, 267, 271) a long succession of rhymed couplets, fourteen of these couplets being decasyllabic, that is, being what we call heroic couplets. Verses 182–217 furnish a transition from the freer lyric of 146–81 to the heroic portion. The inferior quality of the portion more freely lyric has been emphasized already by Mr. Bridges.

that in him which, as I think he was conscious, asked bounds. Not the bounds of the couplet, truly; but the bounds of the stanza. Even of the verse of *Hyperion* I feel the greatness to be *parapgraphic*. The sections of it too much conclude themselves, too much work up to a finish. The inspiration is cut in lengths.<sup>1</sup> Keats felt the necessity for some verse-form which should at once give liberty and impose restraint. It was this that sent him early to the sonnet; this that determined the form of *Isabella*, and, later, of *The Eve of St. Agnes*: in both poems the closed-compartment structure enables him to bring to a fine finish each separate element—to finish everything, indeed, save the story. Within the 'narrow walls' of the sonnet, none the less, Keats felt himself too much imprisoned. Of the Petrarchian form he dislikes, as we saw, the 'pouncing rhymes'; the Shakespearian form, from its 'elegiac' character, too easily falls into a languor and flaccidity from which the end-couplet rouses it only with incongruous effect.

Out of the sonnet, Keats builds in the Odes a stanza of which the repetition furnishes a metrical system more perfectly adjusted, I think, than any other in English poetry to elegiac reflection. Of

<sup>1</sup> The opening of the poem will show well enough what I mean. Lines 1-14 culminate sonnet-fashion. They take up their theme and put it down. 15-20 do the same by a new theme.

its technical merits as an instrument for such reflection I will specify three. First, the compass of the stanza. The quatrain sanctified in our poetry to elegy, to reflection, the quatrain as we know it in *the Elegy*, the quatrain of Gray, wants, it will, I think, be admitted, that scope and amplitude which would allow its characteristic sentiments the degree of development and variation sufficient to save them out of commonplace; it wants that, or, if the poet were a less poet than Gray, a less artist in classic diction, it would want it. At least its bounds are too narrow to hold thought of any degree of subtlety, to carry any element of curious reflection, to allow surprise, to let feeling shift and veer. Of this wider variety and subtlety of effects Keats in the Odes has discovered a stanza easily capacious. Secondly, by the manner in which, in these Odes, there follows upon the elegiac quatrain a Petrarchian sestet—with the expectations which it creates of point and culmination—the whole stanza is kept vivid, and, each time, as it closes, the poetic conscience comes satisfied to its proper rest. But, thirdly; the rests are not full, not inhibitingly conclusive. There is no end-couplet to block transition.

Of these merits we become, I think, especially sensible if we compare any of the great Odes, or odic elegies, of Keats with the two great examples of

elegy left to us by a poet whose verse and imagination has, in these two poems, if not elsewhere, been very obviously influenced by Keats—if we compare the versification of, say, the *Ode to a Nightingale* with that of the *Thyrsis* or *Scholar Gipsy* of Matthew Arnold. Matthew Arnold's stanza was hardly arrived at without conscious reflection upon that of Keats. Like Keats, he employs a ten-line stanza directly developed from the sonnet. Matthew Arnold, however, never practised, as Keats loved to do in his maturer period, the Shakespearean sonnet—as might be expected of so grave a classicist he uses almost always the strictest Petrarchian form. Accordingly, whereas we have found Keats' stanza to be built up from a Shakespearean quatrain followed by a Petrarchian sestet, that of Matthew Arnold consists of a Petrarchian sestet followed by a Petrarchian quatrain, the pattern being *abc bca deed*, the last line of the sestet (the sixth of the stanza) being reduced, in every case, to three feet—in the *Ode to a Nightingale* the reduction of feet takes place in the eighth line of the stanza, the fourth of the sestet. Matthew Arnold's stanza has, like that of Keats, adequate compass and power of development; and avoiding, like that of Keats the end-couplet, it is not involved in a block system—there is easy transition from one stanza to the other. Yet its technical weakness is apparent.

The sestet never works to a point ; it promises culmination, but again and again suffers collapse in its last line—or never reaches it, the pause occurring before it, and the stanza of  $6+4$  falling into a stanza of  $5+5$  lines, or, rather into two five-line stanzas.

And long the way appears, which seemed so short  
To the unpractised eye of sanguine youth;  
And high the mountain-tops, in cloudy air,  
The mountain-tops where is the throne of Truth,  
Tops in life's morning sun so bright and bare!  
Unbreachable the fort  
Of the long-battered world uplifts its wall  
And strange and vain the earthly turmoil grows,  
And near and real the charm of thy repose,  
And night as welcome as a friend would fall.

That Matthew Arnold was himself not happy over this sixth line is shown by the vacillation of his practice in respect of the pause. In the forty-nine stanzas of *Thyrsis* and the *Scholar Gipsy*, he makes a full pause after the fifth line twenty-two times ; a full pause after the sixth line fifteen times ; he avoids any marked pause, either before or after, fourteen times, treating the sixth line as a carry-over line (in the earlier of the two poems, however, there are ten such carry-over lines against four only in the later—which is longer by one stanza). By contrast to all this, Keats habitually separates quatrain from sestet by a full pause after

line 4—there are but three stanzas in the Odes which furnish an exception. He achieves thereby a juster articulation of his stanza, and a smoother and more equitable development of reflection.

## VI

The question of priority in time as between the different Odes which Keats composed in 1819 is one which the data are insufficient for determining; and since it is one of very little importance, I will leave it to be investigated by talents born for such inquiry. It is more important to observe the close connexions of thought which exist between all of the six great Odes with the exception of that *To Autumn* (which we know to have been written towards the end of September). Just as each Ode is something in the nature of a sonnet-sequence, so the Odes, taken together, are a sequence; an ode-sequence of which the relations, not of time, but of mood, to some extent disclose themselves. I have taken *Psyche* to be the first in time of the Odes; and in mood also, I think, it begins them.

The source of Keats' knowledge of the Psyche legend I am not so well able as others to guess; nor, if I could guess it, do I suppose that it would bring me any nearer to the very individual sentiment which Keats has thrown about the legend. The appeal of Psyche to him is not more her 'loveliness'

than her lateness. Of the 'faded' Olympian 'hierarchy' she is latest-born; of divinities that have all passed into unreality, the least real, the most a 'vision'. 'Too late for antique vows', for a poetry of faith—'the believing lyre',—her fascination for her poet is that he himself creates her. Not any substance in the deity herself, but his own eyes, furnish his inspiration:

I see and sing, *by my own eyes inspired.*

To the creation of these inspired eyes there is promised a worship melancholy and languorous enough. Keats will be the priest of Psyche, priest and choir and shrine and grove; she shall have a fane 'in some untrodden region of the mind', and shall enjoy

all soft delight  
That shadowy thought can win.

There shall be a 'bright torch' burning for her, and the casement shall be open to let her in at night. I do not find that any commentator has seized the significance of this symbolism. The open window and the lighted torch—they are to admit and attract the timorous *moth-goddess*, who symbolizes melancholic love.

For this is the deity which these inspired eyes have created. It is only when we come to the last lines with their

bright torch, and a casement ope at night  
To let the warm love in

that we realize that Keats has in fact identified the Psyche who is the soul (love's soul) with the Psyche which means *moth*.<sup>1</sup>

It is a strange goddess whom he has thus brought from her native unrealities into the reality of the imagination. But her identity is certain—we encounter her again, brought into darker shadow, in the *Ode on Melancholy*. The last stanza of *Psyche*—the moth stanza—should be read in close connexion with the first stanza of this (I take it) later Ode.

There is a deeper melancholy than Melancholy itself. Lethe and wolfs-bane and the deadly nightshade and the yewberry—emblems of sadness fetched from the world of flowers—are emblems only meagre and inadequate; in the world, again, of living creatures, the beetle, the owl, the moth, fall short of that for which we invoke their symbolism:

Nor let the beetle, *nor the death-moth be*  
Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl  
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;  
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,  
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

<sup>1</sup> The Greek word means both 'soul' and 'moth' or 'butterfly'. In works of art, Psyche is sometimes represented as a butterfly.

There is the same identification here (only clearer) of Psyche and the moth—here called the *death-moth*. This moth-goddess, this ‘mournful Psyche’, who typifies melancholic love, even if we conceive the melancholy passion wrought to that degree that it is symbolized by the *death-moth*,<sup>1</sup> is no partner in the mysteries of that deeper and truer Melancholy which the Ode celebrates. It is the paradox of this deeper Melancholy that she dwells with beauty, that she has her ‘sovran shrine’ ‘in the very temple of Delight’,<sup>2</sup> though, like the Psyche for whom the *Ode to Psyche* builds a ‘fane’, she is ‘seen of none’ save the poet. The ‘strenuous tongue’ of the poet, his courage of eloquence, which tries all sweets of the sense upon its palate, alone ‘can burst Joy’s grape’, and taste the heart of Melancholy:

His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,  
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The name death-moth Keats seems to have invented. It stands, no doubt, for the death’s-head moth (*acherontia atropos*). The word is formed, presumably, on the analogy of death-worm or death-watch, the creature which he calls the beetle (*atropos pulsatorius*). The ‘death-watch’ is mentioned in *Endymion*, iv. 531—and derives, perhaps, from Wordsworth, *Excursion*, iv. 617. The nightshade, which he also mentions, is sometimes called death’s-herb.

<sup>2</sup> The general idea is anticipated in *A Song of Opposites* (‘Welcome Joy’).

<sup>3</sup> The poet’s soul, it is perhaps worth noticing, is figured here

It is hateful to hunt a moral. But to suppose Keats (or any other poet) to say so much, and to mean nothing of it—or, indeed, less than all of it—is to save poetry out of ethics at too great a price. I suppose him to mean all of it; though that is not to say that he has developed the mood consciously—for so perhaps it would be, not poetry, but prose—or that he is to be detained in it permanently, as though poetry had not many mansions. But I suppose him to say, and to mean, not merely that the poet has a more delicate perception than common men of the beauty of the world of sense, a 'finer palate' for joy; and not merely that this delicate perception is intensified in him by the consciousness (which, again, is deeper in him than in others) that the perfections of sense are born and perish in the same moment; not merely that; but that the top of poetry, its supreme mood, is precisely that mood in which the beauty, of which the poet is priest and worshipper, is so apprehended that the awareness of it is *anguish*—a 'wakeful anguish', in comparison with which all other dark effects which meet in the soul come together as 'shade to shade', 'drowsily' and listlessly, mere melancholic fits of lovesick or repining men.

as one of the ornaments of the temple of Melancholy, just as, in the *Ode to Psyche*, the poet is the lute and pipe and 'chain-swung censer' in the 'fane' of Psyche.

By the grace of God these supreme moments of poetry are rare, these times when the soul is so truly captivated by beauty, by that paradox of simultaneous unfolding and fading which constitutes the glory of the sensuous world, that she is left a trophy hung in the shrine of impenetrable sadness; these times are rare. For the most part, our poetry, like our love, is not more than a 'drowsy' sentiency:

For shade to shade will come too drowsily,  
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul,  
that wakeful anguish which *is* poetry.

'Too drowsily.' Keats likes the word, and the idea. The *idea* pervades the *Psyche Ode*. Upon the *word*, the *Ode to a Nightingale* opens:

My heart aches, and a *drowsy numbness* pains  
My sense.

It is used twice in the *Ode on Indolence*:

Ripe was the *drowsy* hour;  
The blissful cloud of summer-indolence  
*Benumb'd* my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;  
Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower;  
and again:

O folly! What is Love? and where is it?  
And for that poor Ambition! it springs  
From a man's little heart's short fever-fit;  
For Poesy!—no, she has not a joy,  
At least for me, so sweet as *drowsy* noons,  
And evenings steeped in honied indolence.

The mood of this 'drowsy' indolence Keats calls, as we have seen,<sup>1</sup> 'my 1819 mood'. Yet from it spring, as we have also seen, not only all the great Odes, save *Autumn*, but *The Eve of St. Agnes*. The truth is that the drowsiness and indolence of Keats is the poetry of other men; indeed, the poetry of Keats himself, but that he will never be content in it. In the *Ode on Melancholy* he conceives it as a kind of duty for the poet to keep alive in himself the anguished appreciation of beauty. If that 'wakeful anguish' be 'drowned', his insight perishes, he has stopped short of the proper and fatal consummation of the joy of the senses.

This is only the old scepticism about the senses finding for itself a new direction. Out of that luxury of sensation, which is his true effectiveness, Keats must be for ever scheming himself into some unhappiness; now he runs from sense to thought, to metaphysical reflection; now from mere poetry to a poetry of social suffering; and, yet again here, he is not happy till he can discover in the joy of the senses themselves—without the need to go outside them—not unhappiness, merely, but some fated and immortal anguish. If he cannot flee from the pure enjoyment of the beautiful, he can yet perish in it.

Perhaps there is more of Keats in this perverse

<sup>1</sup> p. 55.

ingenuity of the *Ode on Melancholy* than in the rather formal philosophy (if philosophy it be) of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. The *Grecian Urn* we may suppose to have been written in a mood of strong revulsion from the thesis of *Melancholy*. *Melancholy* remains fixed courageously, almost defiantly, in the gospel of the senses, ready to die for, and in, it. It

dwells with Beauty, Beauty that must die,  
And Joy whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu.

It is the world of the poet, though he perish in it. The *Grecian Urn* presents, in fact, the same world, the world of beauty and human passions, only fixed by art. The lover whom the Urn figures loves, not a 'beauty that must die', but that which, from the nature of art, 'cannot fade'. The song that he sings he sings 'not to the sensual ear', but 'to the spirit',

All breathing human passion far above,  
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,  
A burning forehead and a parching tongue.

The first four stanzas of the Ode achieve a faultless harmonization of thought, sentiment, and language. But I have never been able to think the last stanza worthy of the rest, or consistent with it. It begins badly, in diction. I dislike, as much as Mr. Bridges does, the assonance *Attic . . . attitude*, in the first line of it, and the obscurely intended affectation 'brede'. I dislike, in the fifth line, the

metrical carry-over 'As doth Eternity'—this is the only place in the Ode where a clear separation is not maintained between quatrain and sestet. In lines 7–8 the metrical carry-over 'in midst of other woe  
Than ours . . .' is, I think, almost equally objectionable—though the pause after it is less full. Indeed, the movement of the whole of the sestet is 'choppy'. But more serious than any of these faults—and a fault of which these are symptomatic—the connexions of the stanzas both internally and in respect of the stanzas preceding are difficult. The theme of what has gone before is the arrest of beauty, the fixity given by art to forms which in life are fluid and impermanent, and the appeal of art from the senses to the spirit. The theme of the final stanza is the relation of beauty to truth, to thought. Nothing has prepared the transition to this. The first half of the stanza, moreover, makes it the effect of art, of this '*cold pastoral*' (of which, none the less, the loves are 'forever warm') that it 'teases us out of thought, as doth Eternity'. Yet the effect upon which our attention has hitherto been concentrated is that the Urn lifts us out of sense into thought, or at least into 'the spirit' (stanza ii, lines 3–4). What has happened? The beholder, I suppose, kept so long from sense in the region of thought, is now assailed by misgivings about the reality of a work of art thus remote from the warm breathing life of the

sensible world. The figures of the Urn become for him, suddenly, a 'cold Pastoral'—cold with the character of everything that is enduring. In comparison with the warm human world that he knows, what reality have these figured creations? The second half of the stanza—of which the first, marring seriously, as I think, the effect of all that has preceded, has called in question the appeal of ideal art—the second half of the stanza seeks to allay the doubt set up; to allay it by the thesis that there is nothing real but the beautiful, and nothing beautiful but the real.

I find these difficulties, then, in this final stanza. I find them there, I know, by subjecting the verses to a greater rigour of analysis than is just to such a context. But every reader, I think, in some degree feels them, feels a certain uneasiness; and I have not sought to do more than discover the ground of this uneasiness. The lines *are* difficult; they do not, either in thought or feeling, hang true with the rest of the Ode. More than that I would not urge. Down to the end of the fourth stanza there is a very perfect development of the governing idea—'the supremacy of ideal art over nature, because of its unchanging expression of perfection'.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the fourth stanza is more beautiful than any of the others—and more true. The trouble is that it is

<sup>1</sup> Bridges, p. lxvi.

a little too true. Truth to his main theme has taken Keats rather farther than he meant to go. The pure and ideal art of this 'cold Pastoral', this 'silent form', *has* a cold silentness which in some degree saddens him. In the last lines of the fourth stanza, especially the last three lines,

And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return,

every reader is conscious, I should suppose, of an undertone of sadness, of disappointment. This pure and cold art makes, in fact, a less appeal to Keats than the Ode as a whole would pretend; and when, in the lines which follow these lines, he indulges the jarring apostrophe 'Cold Pastoral' (for jarring it is,—we detect, do what we may, some accidental undertone of depreciation), he has said more than he meant—or than he wished to mean. The 'cold Pastoral' is, in fact, beginning to tease him away from thought, from these pure unchangeable ideal forms, back to some creed more like himself than the rest of the Ode.

The lines in this Ode which speak of art as teasing us out of thought echo, as I have already noticed, some lines of the *Epistle to Reynolds*:

Things cannot to the will  
Be settled, but they tease us out of thought . . .  
It is a flaw

In happiness, to see beyond our bourn;  
It forces us in summer skies to mourn,  
It spoils the singing of the nightingale.

The lines were a year old, and more, when Keats wrote the *Grecian Urn*—and the *Ode to a Nightingale*. The latter poem is written in the spirit of them—into the former that spirit, as we have seen, has somewhat inappropriately intruded itself. There is that much connexion between the two Odes; and between the *Nightingale Ode* and *Melancholy* a closer connexion. In the *Ode on Melancholy*, whatever is beautiful in the world is ‘spoilt’ by something in the nature of our apprehension of it—or rather, of the poet’s apprehension of it; by something which is, indeed, in the nature of beauty, of which the true apprehension is anguish. In the *Nightingale Ode*, the singing of the Nightingale is spoilt, not by any anguish which there is in its joy, its ‘happiness’, its ‘ecstasy’, but, as in the lines to Reynolds, by the intrusion of a *human* trouble—in the lines to Reynolds, it is the trouble of abstract thought, in the *Ode to a Nightingale* the trouble of suffering humanity. But it is not accident, I fancy, whereby *Melancholy* opens with its

No, no, go not to Lethe,—

Lethe, where the shades of sorrow come ‘too drowsily’—and the *Ode to a Nightingale* upon its

note of 'drowsy numbness', its mood of sinking 'Lethe-wards':

My heart aches, and a *drowsy numbness* pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
One minute past, and *Lethe-wards had sunk*.

This heart-ache and drowsy numbness, this sinking Lethe-wards, proceed, 'not from envy of' the 'happy lot' of the Nightingale, but from the poet's sense of 'being too happy in its happiness'. This happiness, this mere joy in what is beautiful, seems, as it has so often seemed to him before—'a crime'; 'and yet I must'. He surrenders himself to the spell of it; and it is interesting to observe the subtle shading off of mood into mood as the Ode develops itself stanza by stanza:

But being too happy in thine happiness,  
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,  
In some melodious plot'  
Of beechen green and shadows numberless,  
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

I suppose every poet takes the intoxication of his own words. The 'beechen green and shadows numberless' carry Keats' imagination to dim far-

<sup>1</sup> The transference of epithet in this bold and happy phrase is notable. Similar, and equally bold and happy, is, in the fourth stanza, 'no light, Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown'—.

away forests into which he would gladly, 'leaving the world, unseen' fade away. But the development of the world is delayed over a whole stanza by another phrase, 'Singest of summer in full-throated ease': a phrase which dictates the immediately following:

O for a draught of vintage! that hath been  
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delve earth . . .

with all the luxury of description that succeeds, all so 'full of the warm south':

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim!

But these closing lines of a stanza so rich in sensuous beauty have fallen upon a melancholy rhythm; and again the infection of his own accidents of style, if I may so call them, compels the direction of thought; the rhythm and words together determine the stanza which comes next:

And with thee *fade away* into the forest dim!  
*Fade far away*, dissolve, and quite forget<sup>1</sup>  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever and the fret,  
Here where men sit, and hear each other groan,  
Where palsy shakes a few sad last gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale and spectre-thin, and dies;

<sup>1</sup> *Quite to forget* Earth's turmoiles, spights, and wrongs—Drummond, *To a Nightingale* (*Flowers of Sion*, xxiii. 11). But the coincidence is, I am sure, fortuitous.

Where but to think is to be full of sorrow,  
And leaden-eyed despairs,  
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes  
Or a new love pine at them beyond tomorrow.

The temperament 'too happy in happiness' has drawn here dangerously near to that which dictated the *Ode to Melancholy*:

She dwells with Beauty, Beauty that must die,  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu;

and the 'Away! away!' that introduces the fourth stanza is inevitable—an inevitable revulsion:

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,  
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,<sup>1</sup>  
But on the viewless wings of poesy,  
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards.

The 'dull brain', 'the meddling intellect', as Wordsworth calls it, is not to be allowed to tease him into thought. 'Already with thee!', he says confidently. The night is 'tender', the moon enthroned, with her court of stars about her; and by this time we suppose our poet to be where are all these splendours of light and song. But no. Not

<sup>1</sup> As an illustration of the want of attention—and of knowledge—with which poetry is so often read, I cannot resist putting upon record here a rendering of this line in Latin elegiacs, which I was once shown: Non *Bacchi comites*, non deus ipse duces! (*comites*, 'pard', 'partners').

‘the dull brain’, but the very senses themselves have drawn him back to earth. The moon is on her throne:

But here there is no light,  
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown  
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

The luxury of these ‘verdurous glooms’; their ‘embalmed darkness’, detains him, guessing ‘each sweet’.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
But in embalmed darkness guess each sweet  
Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine,  
Fast fading violets covered up in leaves;  
And mid-May’s eldest child,  
The coming musk-rose full of dewy wine,  
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

That ‘exquisite sense of the luxurious’, in which he could not persuade himself that he was even moderately qualified, has here taken direction of the whole poem. Among these sweets of sense, it seems ‘rich to die’, to make of death itself a kind of sensuous luxury:

To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy!

Still wouldest thou sing, and I have ears in vain,  
To thy high requiem become a sod.

To the stanza that follows I do not feel the objection that Mr. Bridges alleges, who finds the thought 'fanciful or superficial', 'man being as immortal as the bird in every sense but that of sameness, which is assumed and does not satisfy'.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Miss Lowell only answers this objection by not seeing the point of it. 'In calling the nightingale "immortal bird",' she writes, 'and contrasting its eternity of life with man's short existence, any one with a spark of imaginative or poetic feeling realizes at once that Keats is not referring to the particular nightingale singing at that instant, but to the species nightingale.' How people behave who have 'a spark of imaginative or poetic feeling' I would, for my part, rather learn from Mr. Bridges than from Miss Lowell. Except for Mr. Bridges, Miss Lowell would 'not stoop', she tells us, 'to this primer-like explanation'. Primer-like it perhaps is. It is like a bad primer; not merely the teacher, that is, but the child, can see that it is absurd. The species nightingale is just as much, or just as little, immortal as the species man. Nor is it necessary, though nearer to sense, and certainly ingenious, to say with Sir Sidney Colvin that 'what Keats has in mind is not the song-bird at all, but the bird-song,

<sup>1</sup> p. lxiv.

thought of as though it were a thing self-existing and apart, imperishable through the ages'.<sup>1</sup> What Keats has in mind is 'the particular nightingale singing at that instant'. This 'light-winged Dryad of the trees' is, like all other Dryads—and Naiads, and all Nymphs and fays—like all the people of Faery, all the lesser divinities of the classical hierarchy—, immortal. *This* nightingale, and not the species merely to which it belongs, was 'not born for death'. *This* nightingale, and not some other of its kind, was heard 'in ancient days' by I know not what 'emperor and clown'. Has Keats fallen on some confused recollection of *Lear*? 'The foul fiend haunts poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale', says Edgar to Lear and the fool. For Edgar, it is true, the Dryad has turned devil, the fay is the foul fiend.

Whence Keats fetched, in this stanza, the thought of Ruth, Ruth 'in tears amid the alien corn', it is idle to conjecture. It is just this divine inconsequence of poetry which makes its reasoning more consecutive than reason. But I have the fancy, for what it is worth, that the image of Ruth amid the corn came to Keats, by some obscure process of association, from Wordsworth's *Solitary Reaper*:

Alone she cuts and binds the grain,  
And sings a melancholy strain.

<sup>1</sup> *Life*,<sup>3</sup> p. 419.

O listen, for the vale profound  
Is overflowing with the sound!  
No Nightingale did ever chant  
So sweetly to reposing bands  
Of travellers in some shady haunt  
Among Arabian sands.

No sweeter voice was ever heard  
In springtime from the cuckoo-bird,  
Breaking the silence of the seas  
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?  
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow  
For old unhappy far-off things,  
And battles long ago.

What parts of this affecting music and imagery  
faint airs of memory may have borne to Keats' mind, I would not care to inquire too curiously. Some part, I think; and I would even hazard the conjecture that the 'plaintive numbers' of Wordsworth's poem—just that phrase, lingering unaccountably—caused Keats to strike the only false note which the Ode discovers:

Adieu, adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades.

'He loses hold of his main idea in the words *plaintive anthem*', says Mr. Bridges, truly.<sup>1</sup> Not plaint, but 'ecstasy', 'happiness', 'full-throated ease', is the quality of the Nightingale's singing, as Keats hears

<sup>1</sup> p. lxiv.

it in the other stanzas. But Wordsworth, as I fancy, has carried him out of his 'main idea'; Wordsworth, and also, it may be, once again, the infection of his own rhythms—the rhythms in which the penultimate stanza closes:

The same that oftentimes hath  
Charm'd magic casements opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Whether these verses owe anything to Wordsworth's cuckoo-song,

Breaking the silence of the seas  
Among the farthest Hebrides,

I will not ask; they at least owe more to Wordsworth than—where Miss Lowell finds a debt—to Diodorus Siculus!<sup>1</sup> But the melancholy cadence of them, Keats felt himself. He takes up the last word, and makes it the first word, and the key-word, of the stanza following:

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
To toll me back from thee to my sole self.

Mr. Bridges finds the transition 'artificial'. That I do not feel; nor do I feel that the six final verses of

<sup>1</sup> 'perilous seas' has replaced, in Keats' MS., something else—which the editors read as 'keelless seas'. I have seen only the facsimile of the MS. But 'keelless' certainly does not correspond with the *ductus litterarum*; and I could wish that a good palaeographer should re-examine the MS.

the Ode deserve all the praise that Mr. Bridges gives them. 'No praise could be too high', he says, 'for those last six verses.' That praise, I think, is. Both of this Ode and of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* I think the close not wholly worthy of the rest. In both poems, the last stanza seems to me to 'lose hold of the main idea', and to suffer at the same time a deterioration of rhythmical effect.

Of the *Ode to Autumn* I shall say nothing—for what I take to be a good reason. I have nothing to say of it, nothing that I conceive likely to make it more intelligible, or to stimulate reflection upon it. I would not qualify in any particular the judgement of Mr. Bridges. 'I do not know', he says, 'that any sort of fault can be found in it. But though this is the best as a whole, it is yet left far behind by the splendour of the *Nightingale*, in which the mood is more intense, and the poetry vies in richness and variety with the subject.'

## VII

I shall probably be thought to have said sufficient already of the *Ode to a Nightingale*; and so far as the text of it goes, I have nothing to add. But I trust I may be forgiven if I indulge a speculation upon the circumstances of its composition—a speculation which has at least so much interest that it brings Keats into relation with Coleridge, and into con-

nexions, therefore, upon which it is always important that we should keep hold. If what I say helps to emphasize these connexions, I may excuse by that any element which there may be in it of the over-fanciful.

Coleridge's work in poetry, and for poetry, may be said to have ended in the year in which that of Keats' began. In 1817 he collected together in *Sibylline Leaves* his hitherto uncollected poems and in the same year he published the *Biographia Literaria*. It was the year in which Keats' first volume of poems appeared. Coleridge's work was done; the rest of life he was to talk away; he was to drift out of it, as he had drifted through it, a vague, but still great, influence in the lives of young men; an incoherent inspiration, a blurred grandeur, a superstition to himself and others. He had published his first volume of poems a few months after Keats was born; and two years later he had been a partner in the *Lyrical Ballads*. Since then, all that he had done of real worth was summed in the two volumes of 1817. He and Keats met but once—in the spring of 1819. They were both of them living in the north of London—Coleridge domiciled in Highgate with Dr. Gillman, under whose medical supervision he remained till his death in 1834. A letter of Keats records the meeting:

'Last Sunday I took a Walk towards Highgate and in the

lane that winds by the side of Lord Mansfield's park I met Mr. Green our Demonstrator at Guy's in conversation with Coleridge—I joined them, after enquiring by a look whether it would be agreeable—I walked with him at his alderman-after-dinner pace for near two miles I suppose. In those two Miles he broached a thousand things—let me see if I can give you a list—Nightingales—Poetry—on Poetical Sensation—Metaphysics—Different genera and species of Dreams—Nightmare—a dream accompanied by a sense of touch—single and double touch—a dream related—First and second consciousness—the difference explained between Will and Volition—so say metaphysicians from a want of smoking the second consciousness—Monsters—the Kraken—Mermaids—Southey believes in them—Southey's belief too much diluted—a Ghost story—Good morning—I heard his voice as he came towards me—I heard it as he moved away—I had heard it all the interval—if it may be called so. He was civil enough to ask me to call on him at Highgate.'

Coleridge himself has preserved a characteristically inaccurate account of the meeting. That he had a conversation with Keats of some duration, he seems to have forgotten. He remembers no more than that he shook hands with Keats, and that he said afterwards to his companion, J. H. Green, a common friend, 'There is death in that hand'. If he made the remark, it was a foolish one in any case; since neither medical science, nor a poet's intuition can, by shaking hands, detect the latent seeds of a

galloping consumption. But it is more likely that he never made it, that is a dramatic reconstruction *ex post facto*. He made the same remark (or believed himself to have made it) 'not once or twice only' in respect of his friend Steinmetz.<sup>1</sup> What he said when Keats was gone is, in any case, less interesting than what he said while they were together. As Keats indicates, he was a slow goer, and their two miles' walk implies a talk of something like forty minutes. If we could have chosen for ourselves the subjects upon which these two were to talk—the two most purely romantic poets of the romantic revival—could we have selected themes better in keeping with the character and interests of both than those which Keats enumerates? It is worth considering them a little in detail—for many, perhaps, indeed all of them, touch the dominant issues of romanticism. Nightingales, poetry, poetical sensation, metaphysics, dreams and their classification, a dream accompanied by a sense of touch, Krakens, Mermaids, Southey's 'too much diluted' belief in the supernatural, first and second consciousness—was there ever such a forty minutes' talk?—all of it, no doubt, as Keats hints, going nowhere, coming from nowhere, the speaker himself not so much a man as a voice; that unforgettable voice of which Hazlitt said that it was 'the

<sup>1</sup> Coleridge, *Letters*, p. 764.

music of thought'. Keats gives us no more than the heads of topics; and between any one and another of the 'thousand things broached' was evidently perplexed to find the connexion. De Quincey, in his first conversation with Coleridge, experienced the same perplexity; but his comment upon it is valuable. 'Coleridge to many people', he writes, 'seemed to wander; and he seemed then to wander the most when, in fact, his resistance to the wandering instinct was greatest—viz. when the compass and huge circuit by which his illustrations moved travelled farthest into remote regions before they began to revolve. Long before this coming round commenced most people had lost him, and naturally enough supposed that he had lost himself. They continued to admire the separate beauty of the thoughts, but did not see their relation to the dominant theme. . . . However, I can assert from my long and intimate knowledge of Coleridge's mind that logic the most severe was as inalienable from his modes of thinking as grammar from his language.'<sup>1</sup> The truth lies, I think, somewhere between De Quincey and those whom he calls 'most people'; and I have the suspicion that, talking to Keats, Coleridge 'wandered' less than Keats suggests: indeed, I am not sure that we cannot, at least partially, reconstruct for ourselves, even now,

<sup>1</sup> *Lake Poets*, Dent, p. 14.

the development of what was said; and we shall find, I think, reason for believing that parts of it held the imagination of Keats for a longer time than might be inferred from his rather perverse account of the incident.

The conversation belongs, as I have said, to the spring of 1819. Sir Sidney Colvin dates Keats' letter April 15. This was the beginning of that period when, in Carlyle's words, 'Coleridge sat upon the brow of Highgate Hill . . . looking down on London and its smoke-tumult, like a sage escaped from the inanity of life's battle; attracting towards him the thoughts of innumerable brave souls still engaged there. His express contributions to poetry, philosophy, or any specific province of human literature or enlightenment had been small and sadly intermittent; but he had, especially among young inquiring men, a higher than literary, a kind of prophetic or magician-character. . . . To the rising spirits of the young generation he had this dusky sublime character; and sat there as a kind of magus, girt in mystery and enigma; his Dodona oak-grove (Mr. Gillman's house at Highgate) whispering strange things, uncertain whether oracles or jargon.' Keats had moved a few months earlier to Wentworth Place, Hampstead, where he was living with his friend Charles Brown. In the garden of Wentworth Place that Nightingale, the

'immortal bird', 'not born for death', to which Keats' Ode has given the only sure immortality which there is, for men or birds, had built its nest. It was mid-April when Keats and Coleridge met; within a few weeks of their conversation the *Ode to a Nightingale* was written. Is it mere accident that the list of topics upon which Coleridge discoursed begins with the heading 'Nightingales'? Is it too fanciful to suppose that the 'light-winged Dryad' of Wentworth Place had already been heard there, already before mid-April,<sup>1</sup>

Singing of summer in full-throated ease.

If Coleridge had asked Keats—and it was natural enough that he should—what brought him to the Highgate neighbourhood, where he was living, how could Keats better, or otherwise at all, mark Wentworth Place than by the 'melodious plot' of garden where, amid 'beechen green and shadows numberless', his Nightingale sang—had already been heard singing? For the life of me, I do not see how it could have happened otherwise: not if we remember who was speaking, and to whom; that

<sup>1</sup> Writing of the neighbourhood of Godalming, 'the valley of the nightingales', the author of the *Letters of Rusticus*, Edward Newman, a most accurate observer, says: 'The blackcap is abundant with us. It comes on the 13th of April . . . the nightingale accompanies the blackcap, or perhaps precedes it by a single day.'

Keats was talking to one of the partners in the *Lyrical Ballads*; and that, of Coleridge's contribution to the *Ballads* a notably effective part was the 'Conversation Poem' entitled *The Nightingale*. Keats knew the poem well. It was from that poem that he took the queer word 'leafits' (for leaflets), which no one before him, save Coleridge in that poem, had ever used in English. A passage in the third book of *Endymion* (142 sqq.) imitates—as Mr. de Selincourt has pointed out—lines 98–105 of Coleridge's poem. The same scholar has called attention to the fact that the landscape of Keats' Ode is that of Coleridge's poem, given in part, in Coleridge's words (Ode, iv. 10, v. 1–3); and he might have added that, in both poems, the notes of the Nightingale fade into the distance to the same effects. More notable still, perhaps, since it does not touch mere detail, Keats' Nightingale, like that of Coleridge, and unlike that of most poets, is a *happy* bird, not the 'most musical, most melancholy bird' of Milton and convention. That Keats should follow Coleridge in so conceiving the Nightingale is the more remarkable when we remember his enthusiasm for Greek legend. Of the Nightingale of Greek legend—and of Elizabethan poetry—there is no hint throughout the Ode. (She—or he—appears, however, in *Endymion*, iv. 158–63.)

'Nightingales, poetry, poetical sensation, meta-

physics', Keats' catalogue runs. And by this time, I fancy, we can catch the transitions. From the Wentworth Place Nightingale to *the nightingale*, to the real character of its song, not sad, but essentially gay; to the nightingale as Coleridge himself had conceived it in the *Lyrical Ballads*, as a happy bird—here is a transition easily manageable, a transition, if we remember how egotistical Coleridge was, how egotistical all poets are, really inevitable. Coleridge had called his poem on the Nightingale, the *Lyrical Ballads* poem, 'a Conversation Poem'; and when he drifted, with Keats, from nightingales to poetry and poetical sensation, we can surely hold the drift. The mention of his 'Conversation Poem' carried him to 'Conversation Poetry'; and of his conversation upon 'Conversation Poetry' enough can be recovered from chapters xvii sqq. of the *Biographia Literaria*. The *Advertisement* to the *Lyrical Ballads* instructs us that those poems were 'written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure'. Now, between this language and the metaphysics of poetic sensation there is a connexion which was, perhaps, more obvious to Coleridge than it was to Keats. To the authors of the *Lyrical Ballads*, the advantages for poetry of the language of conversation lay in the

fact that it was—as they conceived—a nearer approach than any other to the language of nature. In the poem which closes the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth speaks of himself as

well pleased to recognise  
In nature and the language of the sense

the anchor of his purest thoughts, the nurse of his heart, the ‘soul of all his moral being’. For him the language of poetry is before all else the language of the senses. The *Lyrical Ballads* are, as I have said, before all else, a vindication in poetry of the life of the senses. They are a crusade against the long domination in poetry of the Reason. They have their origin in the conviction that truth, truth in and for poetry, is given by the report of the senses. Poetry begins in the free surrender of ourselves to the impressions of sense. To be poets, we must trust our senses; and we must speak the language of the senses, and not the conventional language of Reason. The theory of poetic diction, or, rather, the theory that there is no such thing, is thus part and parcel of a metaphysic, of a theory of knowledge—of which the cardinal dogma is that the only knowledge worth having (worth having for the poet) comes from the senses.

All this—and much more (for when he wrote the *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge had travelled a long

way from the simplicities of his *Lyrical Ballads* period, a long way, and mostly in the direction of mystifying himself and others), all this, and much more, Coleridge, no doubt, expounded to Keats; all of it we might easily recover from chapters v–ix, xii–xiii of the *Biographia*—the chapters which sensible people omit. All that he said Keats reduces to the bald heading ‘poetical sensation’; and of nine-tenths of it, we may suspect, he understood not a word. But of the pure sensationalism of the *Lyrical Ballads* he understood as much as was necessary; of it, indeed, as we have seen, he regarded himself as the last-left pure expositor—and Coleridge as its renegade. And certainly, Coleridge, as represented by the barely intelligible theosophy of the imagination of which he was now the hierophant, might justly be thought the apostate of his own gospel. What Keats too little perceived was that the practice of Coleridge, his poetry, that is—his best poetry—is little affected by the quackery of scholasticism which corrupts his later theory of it. Keats too little perceived this; and he was, as a consequence, too little sensible of what his own poetry in fact owes to that of Coleridge. In truth, his debt to Coleridge is not less, I am not sure that it is not in some directions greater, than his debt (which he never underestimated) to Wordsworth. In his best poetry, Coleridge is, save for Keats

himself, the most purely sensuous of our poets. And not only the most purely, but the most fully, sensuous. In Wordsworth, the 'life of sensations' hardly goes beyond eyes and ears. Coleridge and Keats, alone of the poets of the romantic revival, have five senses; and all five operate everywhere across their poetry. That needs no saying for Keats; and I began what I had to say of him by saying it with as much emphasis as I was able. It more needs to be said for Coleridge. A deep and rich sensuousness is, despite Coleridge himself, Coleridge's most notable characteristic; and of this deep and rich sensuousness Keats more than any one else, and more than he was himself aware, was the disciple. Among the pieces which Coleridge wrote in his later period, one of the very few which come into the first rate of poetry is the *Garden of Boccaccio*. Keats himself might have written it.

I come back to the Highgate conversation. I have said enough to indicate the significance of the headings 'Nightingales—poetry—poetical sensation—metaphysics'. From these themes Coleridge passed, Keats tells us, to the subject of Dreams; then to Will and Volition, and lastly to Monsters, the Kraken, Mermaids. Here, again, the connexions are, I think, easily discoverable. That dreams and the supernatural should have, for the author of *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan*, an interest involving

one half of his art, goes without saying. A letter written three years earlier to Daniel Stuart probably gives, upon the subject both of Dreams and of Volition, the substance of what Coleridge said to Keats:

'It is among the feebleesses of our nature' (Coleridge writes), 'that we are often, to a certain degree, acted on by stories, gravely asserted, of which we yet do most religiously disbelieve every syllable, nay, which perhaps we know to be false. The truth is that images and thoughts possess a power in and of themselves, independent of that act of the judgment or understanding by which we affirm or deny the existence of a reality correspondent to them. Such is the ordinary state of the mind in dreams. It is not strictly accurate to say that we believe our dreams to be actual while we are dreaming. We neither believe it, nor disbelieve it. With the will the comparing power is suspended, and without the comparing power any act of judgment, whether affirmation or denial, is impossible. The forms and thoughts act merely by their own inherent power, and the strong feelings at times apparently connected with them are, in point of fact, bodily sensations, which are the causes or occasions of the images; not, as when we are awake, the effects of them. Add to this a voluntary lending of the will to this suspension of one of its own operations (that is, of comparison and consequent decision concerning the reality of any sensuous impression) and you have the true theory of stage illusion.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Letters of Coleridge*, p. 663.

We have here, indeed, ‘the true theory’—or what Coleridge takes for such—not only ‘of stage illusion’, but of poetical illusion generally. The letter should be read in connexion with the opening paragraph of chapter xiv of the *Biographia*, where Coleridge describes the governing conception of the *Lyrical Ballads*:

‘During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours . . . the thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them to be real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from what ever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself to be under supernatual agency. For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them when they present themselves. In this idea originated the plan of the *Lyrical Ballads*; in which it was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural or, at least, romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these

shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.'

These two quotations suffice in themselves to carry us, by easy and inevitable transitions, to the very end of Keats' list of themes. But the heading 'Dreams' has, in Keats' record, an interesting subdivision. Coleridge spoke upon the subject of 'a dream accompanied by a sense of touch'. Keats' light-hearted—perhaps even contemptuous—account of the Highgate conversation suggests, certainly, that the whole left upon his mind no very powerful impression. Yet, as we have seen, the whole, or at the least, the better half, of the theory of romanticism was implicit in Coleridge's forty minutes' outpouring of soul. And that some of it stayed in Keats' consciousness, or sub-consciousness, the *Ode to a Nightingale* (written almost immediately afterwards) seems to witness. I fancy that something also lingered—and for a longer time—of what was said about 'a dream accompanied by a sense of touch'. I am thinking, when I say that, of two fragments of Keats' poetry which date from the autumn of this year. They are absent from some of the editions<sup>1</sup>—their poetic value I should not rate highly. Both of them furnish a curious comment upon the heading 'a dream accompanied

<sup>1</sup> They will be found in Mr. de Selincourt's edition<sup>5</sup>, pp. 253-4.

by a sense of touch'. The first of them begins with the lines:

What can I do to drive away  
Remembrance from my eyes?  
*Touch has a memory*, O say, love, say,  
What can I do to kill it and be free?

and ends

Enough, enough, it is enough for me  
*To dream of thee.*

Touch has a memory in dreams. The second fragment is brief, and I give all that there is of it.

This living hand, now warm and *capable*  
*Of earnest grasping*, would, if it were cold  
And in the icy silence of the tomb,  
So haunt thy days and *chill thy dreaming nights*  
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood,  
So in my veins red life might stream again,  
And thou be conscience-calm. See here it is,  
I hold it towards you.

What there is here of mere accident that connects Keats' verses with the tangle of Coleridge's conversation (of which, however, we find the threads more orderly than we expected), I should not care to say; for I do not know what despotism the accident of association may not everywhere exercise in poetry. The second of the two fragments has about it, it will be observed, some suggestion of the supernatural—

the 'tale of terror' made vulgar with the curses laid by wronged lovers, curses working by icy hands reached out in the darkness for vengeance. 'I intend to tip you the Damosel Radcliffe', Keats writes, in one of his letters;<sup>1</sup> and, in another,<sup>2</sup> 'You see', he says, 'what fine Mother Radcliffe names I have—it is not my fault, I do not search for them'. The second of these two references to Mrs. Radcliffe is in connexion with *Isabella* and *St. Agnes Eve*. I agree with Miss Lowell that a recent American writer has tried to make of the influence of Mrs Radcliffe upon Keats, in the *Eve of St. Agnes*, more than good sense can approve. Both poems would have been, no doubt, different from what they are, if they had not proceeded from an age in which Mrs. Radcliffe was what she was. But both of them remain too well this side of Mrs. Radcliffe, the Coleridge side, for it to be worth while to catch at the straws which mark the drift of Udolpho. In this region, in any case, Keats, however insufficiently sensible of what he owed to Coleridge in other directions, knew well who was his master. Without the *Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel*, *Kubla Khan*, perhaps neither *Lamia* nor *La Belle Dame* is thinkable, nor *Isabella* nor *St. Agnes Eve* likely.

It is easy, of course, to say that a half of the effects of the romantic revival derive from the re-emergent

<sup>1</sup> Colvin, *Letters*, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> ib., p. 221.

interest in the supernatural. But I am not sure that, when we say this, we always recognize the wide implications of it. Those other elements which we recognize in 'romanticism', the more civil or secular elements of the medieval expression of life, exemplified by bold or bad barons and their castles, by gay knights, their jousts and tourneys, and by the sublimation of the love-passion to the point of religious ecstasy—these *do*, in fact, involve far less for the art of poetry. For the regress of the romantics upon the supernatural may properly be conceived as raising the whole problem of the creative character of art, and of the meaning of the phrase 'poetic truth'. Already in the Renaissance, the medieval world of 'faery' had been suspect. It had excited the suspicion of two classes of critic; first, of the scholar, who asked himself in what sense the world of 'faery' (a seemingly independent creation) could be conceived as 'imitating' nature—the function this, for Renaissance criticism, of all poetry; and secondly, of the theologian, who asked of 'faery' the kind of questions which *we* now ask of theology. In Ariosto, there is 'a wild story of a cannibal necromancer, who laughs at being cut to pieces, coming together again like quicksilver, and picking up his head when it is cut off, sometimes by the hair, sometimes by the nose'. What has criticism to say to this kind of creation? I take the

example from Leigh Hunt;<sup>1</sup> and I do not know that there is a better answer to the question than that which Hunt offers. 'This,' he says, 'which would be purely childish and ridiculous in the hands of an inferior poet, becomes interesting, nay, grand, in Ariosto's, from the beauties of his style, and its conditional truth to nature.' As I say, I do not know that there is a better answer than that; though what Hunt means by 'conditional truth to nature' I should not like to have to say. I am content to rest in the fact that somehow we do, in Coleridge's phrase, 'transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith'.

What is worth dwelling on is this. The re-introduction into poetry of the supernatural, which the romantics accomplished, re-established the poet in his office of *creator*. Without refuting, it killed the age-long notion that poetry imitates life or nature. The romantic poets owed to their supernatural themes, in fact, a great deal more than the forms which these embody. They owed a sense of liberation, a consciousness of creative power in themselves, a consciousness which worked in a wider field, and in directions far more various than the

<sup>1</sup> *What is Poetry?* 1844.

objects to which it owed its origin. Of this wide liberty of the romantic ideal Coleridge and Keats—and Keats more than Coleridge—are, if not the greatest, yet the purest expositors. Often enough, as we have seen, Keats allows himself to be 'teased' into thought, and, again, out of it; or to be teased into some other region of what he conceives to be the *real*, hunting powers not his own—the power to express character, action, the heroic element in things, or the power that can penetrate the mystery of human suffering. Yet his best work, his purest work, we get from him only when, from these grandiose strivings, he falls back upon an order of things where nothing cries or strives, nothing asks questions or answers them, but in love-sorrow itself there is a kind of luxuriousness, and the deaths that fall are 'rich to die':

Were they unhappy then? It cannot be,  
Too many tears for lovers have been shed,  
Too many sighs give we to them in fee,  
Too much of pity after they are dead,  
Too many doleful stories do we see,  
Whose matter in bright gold were best be read.

## NOTE ON KEATS' USE OF THE SONNET

OF the sixty-five<sup>1</sup> sonnets of Keats which we now possess twenty-one only were printed by himself, the twenty-one which belong to the volume of 1817. We ought to have a text which should include all the sonnets, brought together in chronological order—of most of them the approximate date of composition is determinable. At present they are distributed over the different sections which editors have made in a manner rather capricious, making reference difficult. In the 1817 volume, for example, most editors number 17 of the 21 sonnets there given (as they are numbered in, e.g. Mr. de Selincourt's edition, and in Mr. Forman's—Rossetti's gives no numbers): the other four carry neither number nor distinguishing title.<sup>2</sup> Of the posthumously printed sonnets Mr. de Selincourt brings together 31 in a single section, numbering them individually (in Mr. Forman's one volume edition they are left scattered). There remain, even with Mr. de Selincourt, 13 sonnets

<sup>1</sup> With the fragmentary translation from Ronsard 66.

<sup>2</sup> The Dedication to Leigh Hunt necessarily stands apart. There are other sonnets connected with Leigh Hunt, and I will cite this simply as 'Dedication'.

(making, with those of the 1817 volume, 17 in all) which cannot be cited by numbers, and of which some, having no titles, must be cited by their first lines. Even when a commentator uses, as he will find it convenient to do, Mr. de Selincourt's numbers, he is hampered by having two independent sets of them, i-xvii in the 1817 volume, and i-xxxi for the posthumous sonnets. Here I will use the Arabic figures 1-17 for the 1817 sonnets, and the Roman figures i-xxxi for the posthumous sonnets, referring to the rest by titles or first lines. The inconvenience of all this is obvious. But quite apart from the question of convenience, it would be worth while to bring all the sonnets together in a chronological arrangement, for the reason that to do so would be to exhibit something of the development of Keats' technique. The different sonnet-patterns which Keats essays have their rather notably defined periods. It is well known, of course, that his early sonnets, with one exception (the Homer sonnet) follow exclusively the Petrarchian pattern, which later he discards almost completely in favour of the Shakespearian type. The sonnets of Petrarchian pattern number, in all, 44. Of these, 27 are of that form in which the sestet is restricted to two rhymes. The two earliest of them date from December 1814 (*Byron* and 'As from the darkening gloom . . .'); and it was not until August 1816 that

Keats tried the three-rhyme sestet. From that date until April 1817 he wrote, in about equal proportions, sonnets with two-rhyme, and sonnets with three-rhyme, sestets. Between April 1817 and January 1818, he wrote no sonnets at all. On January 16, 1818, he wrote the sonnet 'Cat, who hast past', a Petrarchian sonnet with two-rhyme sestet. On January 22 he wrote the Lear sonnet (ix), again of Petrarchian type, but with a three-rhyme sestet of a scheme unusual with him, viz. *c d c d e e*. He had used this scheme but once before, and he used it only once subsequently. With it, the sonnet becomes, in fact, Petrarchian octave + Shakespearian sestet. The experiment had important consequences; for, nine days later (Jan. 31), Keats wrote the Shakespearian sonnet, 'When I have fears' (x). On February 4 he reverted to the Petrarchian type in sonnet xi (*To the Nile*). But on the same day he wrote sonnet xiii, in Shakespearian form, and on the day following sonnet xii, in the same pattern. From that date all the sonnets are Shakespearian with three exceptions (xviii, xix, and 'Of late two dainties', all three written while he was on his Scottish tour).

The table that follows gives all the Petrarchian sonnets in chronological order, so far as this can be determined. I have placed in the left-hand column the sonnets with two-rhyme sestets, in the right-

hand column those with three-rhyme sestets. The two-rhyme sestets are all of the pattern *cdc dcd*, the three-rhyme all of the pattern *cde cde*, save where I have indicated a different scheme in round brackets. The signs in square brackets indicate the authority—usually manuscript—for the date of a poem, the notation being that of my Oxford edition of Keats.

1814		
Dec.	'As from the darkening gloom . . .' [W <sup>3</sup> ] Byron [x848]	
1814-15	'Woman, when I behold . . .' 'Light feet, dark violet eyes . . .' 'Ah! who can . . .'	
1815	Chatterton [W <sup>2</sup> W <sup>3</sup> ] Feb. Sonnet 3 May Sonnet 7 (cddc dc) [Examiner] June Sonnet 5 [b] June Sonnet 10 [a'] Aug. Sonnet 1 (cdcd ee) [a]	
Oct.-Nov.	'Fresh morning gusts . . .' 'Minutes are quickly . . .' Sonnet 4 Sonnet 9	'What is there in . . .' Sonnet 1 [TT <sup>2</sup> W <sup>1</sup> W <sup>2</sup> W <sup>3</sup> ] Sonnet 2 Sonnet 12
Nov.	Sonnet 8 [b] Sonnet 13 (date inferred from 14) Sonnet 14 [bL]	
Dec.	Sonnet 6 [b] Dedication	Sonnet 15 [x8r7] Sonnet 16 (cde dce) [Examiner]
1817	Vulgar Superstition (cd cddc) [bT] Sonnet viii [x8r7 T <sup>2</sup> ]	? Sonnet 17 (cde dec) 'Before he went . . .' [T <sup>2</sup> ] Sonnet ii (cdc ede) [TT <sup>2</sup> W <sup>1</sup> W <sup>2</sup> ]
Jan.		Sonnet iii (cddc ee) [TT <sup>2</sup> W <sup>1</sup> W <sup>2</sup> ] ? The Poet (cdcd ee)
Feb.		Sonnet vii (cde dec) [L]
March	Sonnets iv-v [Examiner]	
April	? The House of Mourning (cdcd dd)	

1818			
Jan.	'Cat, who hast past . . .' [W <sup>1</sup> W <sup>2</sup> ]	Sonnet ix (cdcd ee)	
		[RT <sup>2</sup> W <sup>2</sup> ]	
Feb.	Sonnet xi [RW <sup>1</sup> W <sup>2</sup> ]	Sonnet vi (cde dec) [B]	
July	Sonnet xix [L]	Sonnet xviii (cde dec) [L]	
		'Of late two dainties . . .'	
		(cdcd ee) [L]	

At the head of this Table I have placed a poem hitherto wrongly dated, but which we can now date exactly from a shorthand note in *W*<sup>3</sup>, recording a conversation between Keats and Woodhouse. With it I have placed the sonnet to Byron, accepting for the date of it the testimony of Lord Houghton.<sup>1</sup> Immediately after these two sonnets I place three which we have no means of dating, but which are admittedly early. They seem to be covered by Keats' own Note to the volume of 1817: 'The short pieces in the middle of the book, as well as some of the sonnets, were written at an earlier period than the rest of the poems.' Sonnet 3 is dated by the date of Hunt's release from prison. The other undated sonnets of 1816 belong to the period of Keats'

<sup>1</sup> 'One line of it', says Miss Lowell (i. 59) proves it to have been written after the death of Keats' grandmother, Mrs. Jennings:

O'ershading sorrow doth not make thee less  
Delightful.

She is right in her dating. Mrs. Jennings was buried on December 19th, 1814. But was her death one of Byron's 'delightful sorrows'? Miss Lowell has forgotten the line that follows: 'Thou *thy* griefs dost dress', &c. Keats is speaking, not of his own sorrow, but of Byron's.

first acquaintance with Hunt, and may be placed, accordingly, in October–November 1816.<sup>1</sup>

The Table, it will be observed, shows, down to December 1816, only two variations from thesesestet-pattern *cdc dcd*, viz. Sonnets 1 and 7. Of Sonnet 7 we know that it was printed on May 5, 1816; of the date of its composition we know nothing—Miss Lowell says that it was written in November 1815, but for this there seems to be no authority. Sonnet 1 is dated for us by George Keats. In that sonnet for the first time Keats tries a sestet on three rhymes, *cdcd ee*. He had perhaps been studying the sonnets of Sidney, with whom this pattern is normal. He did not like it, however, and he never used it again until the week of experiments which in January 1818 led to the abandonment of the Petrarchian sonnet. But in October–December 1816 he composed nine sonnets with two-rhyme sestets,<sup>2</sup> and seven with sestets on three rhymes. 1817 yields five sonnets with two-rhyme sestets, as against four<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See my Oxford edition of Keats, pp. lxxii–lxxix.

<sup>2</sup> I have placed *Vulgar Superstition* in 1816, instead of in 1815. It is dated by Tom Keats '24 Dec. 1816'; but December 24 fell on a Sunday, not in 1816, but in 1815. In the Crewe House transcript (*T*), however, the date is properly given as 'Sunday Evening 23 Dec. 1816'.

<sup>3</sup> 'Doubt', says Miss Lowell (i. 188), 'has been cast on the authenticity' of 'Before he went. . . . But the piece has recently come to light in Keats' autograph.

in which the sestet is of three rhymes: among the four, however, I have reckoned *The Poet*, for the date of which we have no external attestation; and I can plead no better reason than that its sestet agrees in pattern with Sonnet iii. Sonnet vii is dated by Keats' letter. Sonnet vi shows the same rhyme-scheme. Woodhouse dated it 'March 1816'; some reasons for calling this date in question were given by Miss Lowell. Since Miss Lowell wrote, Keats' autograph draft of the poem has come to light. In it Keats has himself dated the sonnet; and the date, though he has written it so that what he has written is difficult to decipher, seems to be 1818. If Woodhouse's date were right, the piece would belong to a period three months before Keats had written any sonnet at all with a three-rhyme sestet. The recently discovered lines beginning 'The House of Mourning' come to us without date; but they are necessarily later than Scott's 'House of Mourning', to which they refer, which was published early in 1817.

The varieties of Petrarchian sonnet which Keats employs throw some light upon the poets whom, in this connexion, he especially studied. The predominant type (*cdc dcd*) predominates over any other in both Milton and Wordsworth (understanding by 'Wordsworth' the sonnets prior to 1820). Milton employs it in 6 out of his 18 English

sonnets;<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth uses the pattern, roughly, twice as often as any other. Hunt, on the other hand (understanding by 'Hunt', again, the sonnets prior to 1820), does not much favour it, employing it only for 4 out of 28 sonnets: although after 1820, he uses it for 5 out of 9 sonnets. Easily first favourite with Hunt is what is second favourite, not only with Keats (second *longo intervallo*), but with both Milton and Wordsworth—the pattern *cde cde*; one half of Hunt's sonnets are so constructed, 5 out of Milton's 18, and, I think, 7 of Wordsworth's. The pattern *cde dec*, employed in three of Keats' sonnets, is used twice by Milton (thrice if we include the 'tailed' sonnet), once, I fancy, by Wordsworth, never by Hunt. Of the type *cdc dee*, thrice used by Keats, I have noticed two examples from Wordsworth; Milton furnishes one, and Hunt four. I should think it possible that Keats and Hunt were influenced here by Sidney, in whose sonnets this pattern easily predominates over any other. Of the pattern *ddc ee* Milton, Hunt, Keats, each furnish two examples, Wordsworth eight.

I should infer from these figures that Keats is, in his sonnets, influenced primarily by Milton and Wordsworth, and hardly at all by Hunt; and that the influence of Milton came to him mainly through

<sup>1</sup> 19, if we include the 'tailed' sonnet, *On the New Forces of Conscience*.

Wordsworth. Whatever the form, the manner is often that of Wordsworth, never that of Milton.<sup>1</sup> Only in one particular did Keats (and the same is true of Hunt) refuse the Wordsworthian influence. About one half of Wordsworth's sonnets substitute, for the true Petrarchian octave, the rhyme-scheme *abba acca*. But this type appears neither in Keats nor in Hunt—a fact the more remarkable when we recall that Keats' objection to the Petrarchian form is grounded on his dislike of its 'pouncing rhymes'. Both retain the Miltonic rhyme-scheme, and will have nothing to say to Wordsworth's innovation—though innovation it strictly is not, since the rhyme-scheme is as old as Drummond, and was used by Bowles. It is noticeable, again, that neither Keats nor Hunt, devout Spenserians as they both were, ever essay the Spenserian, or Scottish, type of sonnet, with interlaced rhymes, of which the pattern is *abab bcbc cdcd ee*: though the octave to *Peace* seems to be Spenserian (with a Cockney rhyme in lines 5 and 7).

To call the sonnets of any of these poets 'Petrarchian' is of course misleading. In the sonnets of Petrarch himself, the favourite rhyme-scheme for the sestet (the octave is constant, *abba abba*) is *cde cde*; second favourite is *cde dcd*; third favourite *cde*

<sup>1</sup> Unless perhaps we except 'As from the darkening gloom . . .' which acquires Miltonic quality as it grows.

*dec*—other patterns are rare, and the sestet with end-couplet does not occur at all. Milton, in his English sonnets, employs the end-couplet once only (*To the Lord General Cromwell*), rhyming, with the obvious intention of an unceremonious effect, ‘paw’ and ‘maw’. Oddly enough, on the other hand, out of his six Italian sonnets, no less than four end in a rhyming couplet—a licence which his Italian masters would have censured severely. The circumstance lends support to the view that these Italian sonnets were, in fact, written before Milton had been in Italy.

Petrarch maintains a sharp separation between octave and sestet—a strong pause separating them. His octave, again, falls into two quatrains; his sestet into two tercets. These sharp divisions are, in fact, of the essence of the sonnet. But Milton, and Wordsworth following him, neglects them almost entirely. The only sonnet of Milton in which all of them are duly observed is the thirteenth. His octave divides into quatrains only rarely; his sestet into tercets almost never. In his early sonnets the octave is more or less clearly separated from the sestet; but in at least two-thirds of the later ones the division is disregarded. Wordsworth imitates Milton in neglecting the division between octave and sestet—in the volumes of 1807 the sonnets in which the division is *not* observed stand to those in which it is

in a proportion of about three to five. In the same volumes the division of the octave into two quatrains is disregarded in about 50 per cent. of the sonnets; that of the sestet into tercets in about 70 per cent. So far as the separation of octave from sestet is concerned, the practice of Hunt and Keats presents some contrast to that of Milton and Wordsworth. Hunt nowhere fails to make a clear separation, Keats neglects the division in two sonnets only ('Ah! who can e'er' and 'The House of Mourning').<sup>1</sup> The division of the octave into two quatrains is as much neglected by Hunt as by Wordsworth, and is disregarded by Keats in seven of his forty-four Petrarchian sonnets,<sup>2</sup> all of them, save one (sonnet i, Aug. 1816), belonging to his earliest period (1815?). Neither Hunt nor Keats take any more pains than Wordsworth to retain the tercets of the sestet.

In twelve of his forty-four Petrarchian sonnets Keats employs feminine or double rhyme. It appears in the two very early sonnets, 'Woman, when I', 'Ah! who can'. It is used in eight sonnets belonging to the months August–December 1816, viz.

<sup>1</sup> But in his Shakespearian sonnets Keats sometimes allows the octave to run over into the third quatrain, as in xvi, xxviii, and in the Houghton version of xxix—I suppose Houghton's version to be Keats' second thoughts.

<sup>2</sup> viz. *To Byron*, 'Minutes are quickly', 'Woman, when I', 'Ah! who can', and sonnets 7, i and v. Four Shakespearian sonnets neglect the division, viz. xx, xxv, xxviii, xxxi.

'Minutes are quickly', 1, 2, 6, 12, 15, 16, 17, and (in 1817?) in 'The House of Mourning'—all of these, save the first, sonnets with sestet on two rhymes. Of the nine sonnets written in these months with two-rhyme sestet, all, in fact, save three, show feminine rhyme. The feminine rhyme appears also in sonnet iii, which belongs to February 1817 (so that the trick may be regarded as a survival from the end of 1816). The only other sonnets which show feminine rhyme are xvi and xxvi, both Shakespearian sonnets, of which the first dates from the period when Keats had just abandoned the Petrarchian for the Shakespearian type (Mar. 1818). In xvi the feminine rhyme occurs in the end-couplet, which, as we know, was that element in the Shakespearian sonnet to which he found it hard to reconcile himself. xxvi dates from the week of experiments in sonneteering which led to the discovery of the Ode-stanza, and to the abandonment of the sonnet for the Ode.<sup>1</sup>

Occasional Alexandrines, i.e. dodecasyllabic lines, occur in the sonnets. In *Peace* both the ninth and the last line are Alexandrine. So is the eighth line of 'Before he went', the tenth line of sonnet ii, perhaps the last of sonnet iv—all these 'Petrarchian'. Two Shakespearian sonnets contain Alexandrines, namely xxv, line 14, and, in the *Athenaeum*

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 85 sqq.

version, xiv, line 6. These Alexandrines may be due to the influence of Sidney. The seventh line of the sonnet to Byron is octosyllabic:

O'ershading sorrow doth not make thee the less  
Delightful; thou thy griefs dost dress (7)  
With a bright halo, shining beamily.

This is due, I think, to mere accident in transcription. Keats, I would suggest, wrote

Delightful; thou thy *(thorny)* griefs dost dress  
—the halo round the crown of thorns would be familiar to him from pictorial art, and the word *thorny* might easily have dropped out by what the palaeographers call 'haplography'.<sup>1</sup>

From these varying line-lengths, I do not think that we can draw any inference as to the date of composition of any of the sonnets.

I add a list of the sonnets of Shakespearian pattern, with the known dates, and our authority for the dates:

1816 Oct.	Sonnet ii [ <i>Examiner</i> ]
1818 Jan.	Sonnet x [ <i>RW<sup>2</sup>L</i> ]
4 Feb.	Sonnet xii [ <i>Longmore</i> ]
5 Feb.	Sonnet xiii [ <i>RW<sup>1</sup>W<sup>2</sup></i> ]
8 Feb.	Sonnet xiv [ <i>RTT<sup>2</sup>W<sup>1</sup>W<sup>2</sup></i> ]

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Forman approves the insertion of *ever after* *dost*.

I will hazard here yet another correction in the text of the sonnets. In the second line of 'As from the darkening gloom . . .' I think it likely that for *light* we should read *bright*, which gives a true rhyme for *delight*.

1818	March	Sonnet xvi [L]
	July	Sonnet xxi [L]
	Aug.	Sonnet xx [L]
	Sept.-Dec.	Sonnet xxii [W <sup>2</sup> ]
1818	(month-date uncertain)	Sonnet xvii [T <sup>2</sup> W <sup>1</sup> W <sup>2</sup> End.]
		Sonnet xv
		To A. G. S.
1819	March	Sonnet xxiv [L]
	before April	Sonnet xxvi [L]
	April	Sonnet xxiiii [L]
	April	Sonnet xxvii [L]
	April	Sonnet xxviii [L]
1819	(month-date uncertain)	Sonnet xxix [TT <sup>2</sup> ]
		Sonnet xxx [T <sup>2</sup> ]
		Sonnet xxxi [T <sup>2</sup> ]

I have omitted from this list the anomalous 'sonnet' *On Peace*. The octave of it may pass for Shakespearean, *abab cdcd*; but it is not certain that Keats did not intend *abab bcbc*. The sestet shows the pattern, not elsewhere exemplified, *dde, dee*. Lines 9 and 14 are of six feet. The date of the poem is uncertain; the occasion of it is usually taken to be the second Peace of Paris, 1815; and I think this date more probable than 1814. The later date perhaps derives some support from comparison with the lines *To Hope*. Keats has himself dated *To Hope* for us (Feb. 1815); and lines 8-10 of the sonnet might be plausibly interpreted as referring to the sixth stanza of *To Hope*. I have placed Sonnet xii, the Spenser sonnet, hesitantly in 1818. Mrs. Longmore, who had the autograph of it before her,

deciphered the date as 5 February 1818. But editors generally have disregarded this testimony, and the poem is commonly placed, on internal evidence, among Keats' earliest compositions. I at one time suggested 1816. But I am now disposed to accept, with Mr. de Selincourt, the Longmore dating. It is not one of Keats' better sonnets. But there are several sonnets of 1818 to which it is not plainly inferior. I know no means of dating Sonnet xv (*To J. R.*)—the date suggested by Miss Lowell, April 1818, is, if we neglect her arguments for it, probable enough (*John Keats*, i. 615). The three sonnets of April 1819 are, so far as we know, Keats' last attempts in this species.

The sonnets of Keats have been variously judged. The pages which precede have said almost nothing of their literary quality, and I will make use of this Note to fill the gap. I am the more moved to do so because I do not rest altogether happy in some of the individual judgements of my best guide in Keats—I mean Mr. Bridges. Alone of the poets of the romantic revival, Wordsworth excepted, Keats has left to us, in this kind, a body of poetry notable both in quality and amount. Of the effects which this kind essays he was—I have made it plain—a wakeful observer; and of the means to those effects. I think I have also made it plain that he did not count himself altogether to have attained; that he

was dissatisfied, if not with the form itself, at least with its aptness to his own talent—as an instrument for the expression of what he himself was most concerned to express. Nor am I sure that he grew better in it from a fuller experience of its difficulties. I am not sure, that is, that the later sonnets improve on the earlier ones. Of the later sonnets, I suppose most people would put first the so-called ‘Last Sonnet’. Of this I have already said enough, and perhaps too much. Far nearer to perfect work I take to be the ‘irregular’ sonnet *To Sleep*—though even there I take some offence, in the penultimate line, at ‘oiled wards’. Of the sonnet ‘As Hermes once’—certainly effective, and in an individual romantic kind—I am not sure how much of the effectiveness may not be derived from the associations of *La Belle Dame*. Only one other of the later sonnets, I think, can come into the first rank—*The Human Seasons*. Yet I do not feel that the end-couplet here, with its boldly imperfect feminine rhyme, altogether sustains the admirably proportioned effects of what has preceded. Next after these I should place the King Lear sonnet and ‘When I have fears’; yet of them, the former nowhere lives up to the promise of its initial quatrain, and in the latter the beginning of the sestet suffers from the same weakness as that to which I have adverted in the ‘Last Sonnet’. A sonnet which

should carry more impressiveness than it does is 'Why did I laugh tonight?' It is marred by a manner too melodramatic, and by what, in another poet, I should feel to be some failure in sincerity.

Of the Petrarchian sonnets of the early period, ten seem to me to stand out; the three Hunt sonnets (the Dedication, 3 (though it dies meanly), and 14), 'How many bards', 'Keen fitful gusts',<sup>1</sup> 'To one who has been', *On Chapman's Homer*, 'Give me a golden pen', 'The poetry of earth', *On the Sea*. The Chapman sonnet stands by itself; unique in Keats for the masculine quality which distinguishes it—contrasting here very notably with the sonnet 'Give me a golden pen' which, in the volume of 1817, immediately follows it. Yet in the Chapman sonnet, the second quatrain will be felt by most persons to be much inferior to the other parts. Second to this sonnet I should put—hesitantly—that *On the Sea*—for which Mr. Bridges might, I think, have found a place among his ten 'very fine sonnets'. An unworthy last line notwithstanding, it is 'very fine'. The other Petrarchian pieces which I have named fall below either of these; the best of them I think to be the Dedication—of which

<sup>1</sup> In line 8 'home's pleasant lair' is weakly phrased ('pleasant lair' comes from an earlier sonnet, 10): in line 11 the *fair hair* of Milton is irrelevant to his distress: and line 13 hardly carries Laura's 'light green dress'.

the painfully elaborated paganism announces the character of everything that follows it—and ‘Great spirits now’. The latter piece it is perhaps difficult for lovers of Wordsworth to judge dispassionately; it comes to them with such a crowding of memorable associations—Haydon’s portrait of Wordsworth, Shelley’s sonnet provoked by the portrait, Wordsworth’s own sonnet (one of the noblest) addressed to Haydon. It was one of Matthew Arnold’s eight sonnets. It is at least worth noticing with what succinctness of truthful characterization Keats marks, in each of the great men whom the sonnet celebrates, what is most memorable. What he says of Haydon,

whose steadfastness could never take  
A meaner sound than Raphael’s whispering,

could have been better said, perhaps, but not more truly. Haydon, if he had been content to aspire to a range lower than the Raphaelite, would have been, it is likely, a more excellent artist; but he would have taught less to Keats, and, it may be, to Wordsworth—whose sonnet recognizes in him the same ‘steadfastness’ as that of which Keats speaks:

the service of a mind and heart,  
Though sensitive, yet in their weakest part  
Heroically fashioned.

It is proper that lovers of Keats—who, because they are that, find it hard to love Haydon—should remember this heroical fashion of his mind; for it was not without its influence in directing the genius of Keats towards large conceptions. But the power, which this sonnet shows, of succinct characterization, I mention for another reason; for the reason that, in general, the sonnets of Keats fail of succinctness. Most of them labour from a too great diffusion of sentiment and imagery. Of most, the beginning and middle part is too luxuriously developed, and the end is hurried and perfunctory; instead of closing, they suffer a guillotine. This undue diffusion is only one aspect of a general femininity. From this femininity, perhaps, of the greater sonnets, only that on Chapman's Homer (as I have already noted of it) escapes. *Ailsa Rock* escapes from it, and, so far, deserves a place in any selection of sonnets. But this sonnet is, like its theme, craggy. It wants ease and perspicuity; and its second, sixth, and last lines are faulty.<sup>1</sup>

For another of the Scottish sonnets, which seems not to be a general favourite, I own to a fond-

<sup>1</sup> That the Rock should be asked to answer the solemn interrogations of the poet in the scream of sea-fowls (line 2) is incongruous. The expression 'fathom dreams' is obscure (line 6); and, in a 'giant size' (the last words), 'size' is plainly inadequate. The piece belongs to the weeks of the Scotch tour, and is a reversion to the forms of Keats' early period.

ness, that *On Visiting the Tomb of Burns*. The consecution of ideas is not easily apprehended; nor do I know, in line 10, to what the expression 'Minos-wise' refers (I suppose that Keats means merely 'with just judgement'). In line 7 I take 'their' to be a misprint, or miswriting, for 'these'. Yet the piece, as a whole, is 'beautiful, cold, strange'—and effective; effective even where not completely intelligible; essentially a 'romantic' sonnet. None the less I think that any one reading it will feel the bounds of the sonnet to be here too narrow; will feel that an idea has missed expression.

But a list of 'best sonnets' is at best an idle thing; it needs best critics, or better, best poets to make it; and even so they fall to logger-heads. Mr. Bridge's list, as he notices himself, is very different from that of Matthew Arnold. Both these poets employ, in their own sonnets, the Petrarchian form, to the exclusion of the Shakespearian. But for the Petrarchian sonnets of Keats Mr. Bridges has not much use; and of those that he likes, he likes some better, I think, than he need. I can guess why he likes the Leander sonnet, and yet doubt whether it has that strength which could give it a place among a 'best ten'. Of 'Nymph of the downward glance' I can see the merits; but all of them, to my mind, hardly redeem the piece from a certain Cockneyism of which the very first line is preclusive.

Both 'I cry your mercy' and 'The day is gone' come into Mr. Bridges' first ten. Yet in either, despite the assessable charms of both, I seem to myself to catch notes of the temperament which wrote lines 328-32 of the first book of *Lamia*. 'Time's sea', another of Mr. Bridges' selection, escapes the faults of this temperament. It is, of all Keats' Shakespearian sonnets, the most like a sonnet of Shakespeare. But it is too much pervaded by the intention to be so; it wants, I feel, *nature*.

The truth is that almost all the sonnets are worth having; nearly all of them, that is, add something to the sum of poetical effects in their kind. They add something, and they are also valuable as leaving something behind; they escape, as Mr. Bridges remarks truly, that self-consciousness and 'puzzle-headedness and pedantry' that are the bane of most sonneteering. Yet upon the whole we cannot count Keats to have attained here. He did not count himself to have attained—he printed less than a third of his sonnets. He did not count himself to have attained. He was only reaching forward—reaching forward to the high mark of the Odes; groping towards the forms which his genius needed; forms which would furnish at once the freedom and the restraints which were necessary to his temper.

An interesting experiment is the blank-verse

sonnet *What the Thrush said*. The fancy of such a rhymeless sonnet came to Keats, I suppose, from Spenser—he had written his sonnet to Spenser just a fortnight before. I recall no other poet who in this species had tried to dispense with rhyme. But Keats' experiment should have ended with the fifth word of line 11.